

Three-time Hugo Award Nominee

# SABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

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**12 stories**



# Omnivorous Believers



Human beings are naturally omnivorous creatures, and food preferences have traditionally been tied to local culture. Snails, insects, hallucinogenic mushrooms, the glands of large mammals, and untold hosts of fruits and vegetables have all had their turns as dietary staples for different human tribes and nations.

But that was before McDonald's and Coca-Cola. These two basic food groups have largely driven out the others and changed eating habits all over the world. In places where people used to eat lizards, they now dine on Big Macs. Crickets are rejoicing in many parts of the world, and the arrival of chicken nuggets has the local frog population giving a croak of relief in still others. Soon the Earth will boast no vegetable but the french fry and no fruit but the apple pie. I say good riddance. And if you ever saw (or smelled) a haggis, you would agree the triumph of commercial marketing over human provincialism is not all bad.

This same trend to homogenization is visible in their entertainment, financial affairs, language, clothing, and architecture. There are few places left on Earth where you can't use your Visa card, fewer still where you can't catch the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger film.

Some of the more intellectual human beings make a great show of worrying over this and arguing about it, but the only ones who think worldwide cultural homogenization ought to be stopped are the ones who already have Visa cards and memberships at Blockbuster Video. Why should they care if other people have to manage their finances through the medium of cowrie shells? But the mall-ification of planet Earth cannot be stopped. There are few things easier than inducing a human being to trade wooden shoes for Reeboks. Give them cable, and the locals will stop everything to watch MTV. They will riot for blue jeans, turn their sled dogs loose for snowmobiles, and discard their dugout canoes for jet-skis.

I am an observer, of course, so I make no judgments about the trend toward cultural homogenization, but I think if it puts an end to cannibalism and Swedish films, it is probably — on balance — a good thing.

The last great bastion of human diversity is in their beliefs. The number and variety of human beliefs is simply bewildering. There are human beings who believe that when a tree falls in a forest, it doesn't make any sound. There are those who believe their planet is flat, those who believe thinking is evidence of their personal existence, and those who believe the professional wrestlers on television are actually hurting each other. Some believe in a brain-mind duality, some believe in reincarnation, some believe they determine their own actions, some believe they don't. UFOs, demons, evil spirits, ghosts, channels, and Elvis all have their cultists. Some human beings believe the sexual drive is responsible for all motivation, and some believe there's no such thing as motivation. For almost anything you can name, there are believers and there are doubters. Some of them believe and doubt at the same time.

On our planet, where we only believe about six things, we can hardly comprehend the range of choice human beings have in what they believe. This choice is not restricted by either reason or natural law. A human being simply needs to like an idea in order to believe in it. God, right and wrong, natural selection, gravity, and television soap operas are all up for grabs in the human mind. Any idea they can conceive has a candidacy for some human being somewhere as an article of faith.

And speaking of faith, human religion is a genuine wellhead of diversity. There are uncountable numbers of Chinese folk religions, newly-founded Asian religions, and tribal religions in out-of-the-way places. Those three broad groups alone account for about eight per-

cent of humanity. Shamanism, Spiritism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Baha'ism, Zoroastrianism, and a few others share about one percent of the world's population. Atheism, at over four percent of the population, is one of the world's principal religions. And the religion of no religion claims nearly seventeen percent of the market, making it the third largest religious group, following just after Islam. The six "majors" (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Atheism) account for nearly three-quarters of humanity. (If all the figures don't add up, it's not important. One of the basic rules of human statistics is that percentages may not add up to one hundred. This rule, too, has both adherents and doubters.)

At seventeen percent, the non-religious are more than half the size of Christianity, which currently has the largest market share. Any religion that finds the key to converting the nonreligious will eventually dominate all the other majors. Atheism, although it is larger than Judaism right now, probably has the smallest growth opportunity among all the majors — it just doesn't have very many missionaries.

Christianity and Islam are the ones with the strongest commitment to increasing market share. Christianity has more resources, Islam more zeal. One thing is certain: the prize will go to the first one that comes up with the religious equivalent of the Big Mac. Prepackaged miracles could carry the word out to the remotest corners of the world, which is what makes me think that ultimately the largest human religion will be Disneyism. □

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# The Hot New Writers



Where are the hot new writers coming from? That was the question the staff of *Esquire* magazine recently asked.

The response, in an article titled "New Voices in American Fiction" on the cover, and "New American Writers" inside the July 1992 issue, was that "budding writers ... often appear first in underground magazines and small presses. Give them a little nurturing — writing programs, fellowships, conferences, et cetera — and their reputations, to say nothing of their egos, start to grow."

*Esquire's* staff went on, under the direction of Literary Editor Will Blythe, to identify these hotbeds for new writers. The list, using a garden metaphor, included such prestigious stalwarts as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Antaeus*, *The New Yorker*, and *Antioch Review*.

## A Rare Hybrid

There was only one science fiction magazine mentioned: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. *Esquire* placed *Aboriginal* in the category of "Rare Hybrids." *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, a critical literary review, was also on the list, but it publishes no fiction.

That's the good news ... and the bad news, as I joked recently.

It's the good news, because finally *Aboriginal* has received an objective acknowledgment that it has accomplished exactly what we set out to do in 1986: bring talented new writers into the fields of science fiction, publishing, and literature. The recognition has nothing to do with power, or wealth, or commercial success; it's focused only on what we've accomplished. It's based on ac-

tually reading the magazine and the stories in it.

From the very first issue, we've published "new" writers. (The word new is a misnomer in this context, since most of those "new" writers had been at it for years before making a sale — something which is very common in the field.) And we plan to continue to do so. It's even been written into the charter of The Second Renaissance Foundation, the non-profit literary organization that runs *Aboriginal*.

New writers are often the ones who reach extra deep to create a gem, who struggle harder to make each word and scene the best they can create. They are motivated by

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the spirit of writing, the Muse. They aren't banging out the tenth installment of a series which was originally intended to be one story but has become too lucrative to stop. New writers aren't afraid to challenge us or themselves, in part because they have little to lose. They're not worried about angering a fandom which has them captive, forcing them to repeat the same old thing over and over again, the extreme example of which is illustrated in Stephen King's novel *Misery*. The irony of this syndrome of being trapped by one's own popularity is that, more often than not, those who become trapped once were the hot new writers of their time.

But new writers have a hardscrabble existence. Very few

make a living at their preferred trade. Most have to take full- or part-time jobs to support themselves and their families. The best advice to new writers remains: "Don't give up your day job."

When they finish their latest work of wonder, it goes out in the mail and arrives at editorial offices (ours included) buried by hundreds and thousands of similar submissions from hundreds and thousands of other would-be writers.

How, then, does one choose? How does one out of hundreds of manuscripts get elevated from the slushpile into the published world? How does one go from a would-be to an actual published writer?

It's about time I discussed my editorial philosophy. Maybe it's a bit overdue.

Literature begins with the story, and the story began around campfires in our prehistoric past. For thousands of years, literature was only a verbal tradition, as much acted as told — a retelling of that day's hunt, speculation about the mysterious forces that inserted chaos into the lives of our distant ancestors ... mysterious forces like the sun, the moon, rain, snow, and disease.

## Around the campfires

It is around these campfires that deities and demons were born.

The invention of an alphabet and writing finally allowed specific versions of stories to be transcribed so they could be handed from generation to generation without suffering the constant changes inevitable due to bad memory or individual creativity. It was with the onset of

the written word that literature was taken away from the people (though some oral tradition survived) and made a proprietary treasure of the select few: those who could read and write — usually the wealthy and powerful.

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, which made it possible to mass-produce books and pamphlets, is what returned literature to the people, the common men and women. Not only could stories be printed cheaply; so could textbooks used to teach others how to read. Gutenberg made modern education (or what's left of it) possible.

As literacy rates grew, literature started to be broken down into categories, often artificial (such as those based on marketing rather than quality). And literature became *Literature*, where a handful of "experts" once again began to exert a sort of proprietary control over what was, and what *wasn't* literature — according to *their* definitions.

Even though my degree is in English Literature (with a minor in science), I don't belong to that school of thought.

All published work is literature, from your local newspaper to the latest best-selling novel, including stories which appear in obscure, out-of-the-way journals.

### "Just the facts."

I make my living as a journalist and help produce what we jokingly refer to as the "rough first draft of history." We call it that because most news stories are written in ten minutes to an hour — not a lot of time for art or artifice, but enough time for, as Joe Friday said, "the facts, just the facts, ma'am." (Or at least what appear to be the facts at the time.) The better work, usually columns, on which more time can be taken, eventually transcends the medium in which it appears, becoming memorable, immortalized, *Literature*. But all of it is literature, types included (of which we disavow all knowledge).

Bringing all this back home, what I'm saying is that the

editorial philosophy at *Aboriginal* is an open one. We aren't elitists, and don't cater to them. We aren't snobs, and haven't much patience with them. Elitism and snobbery are fundamental signs of insecurity. People with little self-concept or understanding find it necessary to define themselves by putting others down. We think that's as petty and short-sighted in literature as it is in life.

But in a very real sense, we are traditionalists: we insist that what we publish be a story, in the traditional literary sense. This means that the beginning has something to do with the ending, that a simple journalistic series of events won't do, that a story has to have a character as its focus, or there's nothing and no one for the reader to identify with (or against). The story can be a modest tale of courage, suitable for telling around a campfire. Or it can be a complex interweaving

### I acknowledge Shakespeare's first rule: remember the tomatoes.

of multiple plots and themes, leaving it for the reader to sort out once the last period appears.

As the editor, I acknowledge Shakespeare's first rule: remember the tomatoes. Actually, I made that up, since there probably were few, if any, tomatoes in England at that time, but the rule still applies to rutabagas.

Each time he (or she, for the real revisionists) sat down and wrote a play, Shakespeare remembered that he had to keep the field hands and chimney sweeps in the pit (the open area just in front of the stage in Elizabethan theaters) happy. If he didn't, then he'd never get through the first act, and his cast, among whom he often was counted, would be pelted by the spoiled and rotted fruits of the audience's labor. The reviews were instant.

In other words, to truly be

literature, a story has to appeal to the common and elite alike. No sneers allowed. A writer can't pander to one or the other but must play the middle ground, taking chances with both sides.

That is a small fraction of what we're looking for at *Aboriginal*. If you are an aspiring writer, we can guarantee you two things: 1. Your manuscript will always be reviewed by the editor (me) even though we do use first readers; 2. You will always get some indication of why we didn't accept the story. Unless you forgot to include a SASE! There are very few magazines, in or out of the field, where both of those things happen. I read and respond to all submissions. I do use a check-off form, but it's intended to help the writer. If I can give a writer some indication of what is wrong with a story (from our point of view, we don't pretend to be making PRONOUNCEMENTS); it increases the odds that the next story submitted will be more suitable for us, which makes my job more pleasant, and gives writers a better chance of getting published.

One little caveat. Earlier I said all "published" work was literature, not all "printed" work. Some manuscript submissions we receive — and all other editors get similar submissions — are terrible. The would-be writers in these cases haven't even put in the most basic effort of finding out how to spell, type, form a sentence, use antecedents, develop a plot, or create a character.

### Little more than essays

Many submissions are little more than essays, and an essay is not a story. Stories need a plot, character(s), theme, setting, and plausibility. In other words, they have to be better than life, because many actual events in life have little plausibility or logic. Writing is work, hard work, and like many things in life, one gets out of it what one puts in.

## The bad news

The bad news about the recognition by *Esquire* is that those who imagine, and want to keep, science fiction as a ghetto literature, one which only the "ins" can understand or appreciate, will see recognition by an "outside" entity as either meaningless or negative. That attitude is not only bad news, it's sad news, because it is contrary to what the practitioners of SF set out to do: open up the wonders of science and technology to those who may not be scientists through the vehicle of a lively and imaginative literature.

I've never asked him, but I'll bet dollars to doughnuts that Hal Clement, a.k.a. Harry Stubbs, was not aiming his classic SF novels at only a select few insiders. Go back and read *Needle* or *Mission of Gravity* if you think me wrong. In the real world Harry was a science teacher before he retired. He is enthusiastic about science, frustrated by those who view it from a wrong-headed, negative point of view.

The only thing "insider" about his novels and stories is that he tries to draw the reader inside his vision and understanding of science, and the possibilities it offers us for the future.

Utopian or dystopian, that's what all good science fiction does. It reaches out to everyone.

In simple truth, *Aboriginal* was included in the *Esquire* list because when Will Blythe asked a friend if he could recommend a good science fiction magazine, that friend mentioned us. After searching most of New York, Blythe found a few copies, read them, and liked what he read.

That friend just as easily could have mentioned some other magazine to Blythe and then he may never have discovered *Aboriginal*.

That's "the facts, ma'am; nothing but the facts." □

## Deep Space Nine gets cast

Paramount Picture's television division has announced the cast of the proposed spin-off series from *Star Trek: The New Generation* which is scheduled to premiere in January.

Set in the 24th Century, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* places a crew of Starfleet officers on an alien space station located near a newly discovered wormhole which offers a shortcut to an unexplored quadrant of the galaxy.

Among the announced cast are: Avery Brooks, as Benjamin Sisko, best known for his role opposite Robert Urich in the TV shows "Spencer," and "A Man Called Hawk;" Rene Auberjonois, as Odo, who played Clayton Endicott III in the TV series "Benson;" Siddin El Fadil, as Dr. Julian Bashir, who has played theatrical roles in London and was King Feisal in the PBS show "A Dangerous Man;" Terry Farrel, as Jadzia Dax, who has had appearances in "Paper Dolls," "L.A. Madame," and "Quantum Leap;" Cirroc Lofton,

as Jake Sisko, who has had a film role in *Beethoven*, and will make his TV debut in the ST series; Arim Shimerman, as Quark, who has had roles in "Brooklyn Bridge" and "Beauty and the Beast;" and Nana Visitor, as Kira Nerys, who has co-starred in "Working Girl" and appeared in "Thirtysomething," "Murder She Wrote," and "L.A. Law."

In the premiere two-hour episode, a Starfleet crew is sent to take over an abandoned Cardassian space station ("Deep Space Nine") with the assignment of moving it to a position near the newly-discovered wormhole, where it will be of strategic importance to humans and aliens who wish to exploit the access to a previously unexplored portion of the galaxy.

*Enterprise* Captain Jean-Luc Picard will have a guest appearance in the premiere.

Rick Berman and Michael Piller are the executive producers of the new ST series. □

## You can help

The Second Renaissance Foundation is a non-profit Massachusetts organization [(501)(c)(3) application pending] that has taken over the operation of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* in order to keep the magazine coming to you on a regular basis. While we and the staff of the magazine will be putting forth our best efforts, there may be a bump or two along the way. We ask that you please bear with us.

We are all doing this on a part-time basis, which means working evenings and weekends, and no one is being paid a salary. We may make some changes in the future, but we hope to keep the unique character of the magazine alive. We hope to restore the full-color art as soon as the economy allows.

The biggest problem we face is that it currently costs more to produce the magazine than it earns. The magazine needs to raise funds. So if you can afford a tax-deductible contribution (be it \$10, \$25, \$50, or more), and are willing to help, you can send your donation to:

The Second Renaissance Foundation  
P.O. Box 2449  
Woburn, MA 01888

# The Emperor's Twisted Mind



Roger Penrose's new book, *The Emperor's New Mind*<sup>1</sup>, is fascinating, thought-provoking, and the sort of book that often requires the reading of a passage dozens of times before you even begin to get a glimpse of what it is that you don't understand. It twists and turns, then twists again. But it is well worth the work.

From the title, *The Emperor's New Mind*, it is not too difficult to figure out what Penrose is trying to explain. It is his contention that "strong AI" (artificial intelligence), in which self-awareness is created in a computer by implementing some algorithmic (a set of detailed mathematical instructions) procedures, simply will not work. He further states that "the outward manifestations of conscious mental activity cannot even be simulated by computer."<sup>2</sup>

Penrose envisions himself as that too sensible member of the Emperor's kingdom who calls out to tell him that his "New Mind," those algorithmic instructions in the computer, is no more self-aware, no more a human mind than his nonexistent new clothes are really some wonderful new royal robe that only those who are not fools can see. Penrose's conjecture has created a huge controversy in the arena of artificial intelligence as well as in the philosophical community. What he says is that no matter what you do, you can't build a mind, can't stuff enough transistors into a box and create some-

thing that is self-aware. What I'm going to attempt to do is explain just what it is that Penrose is trying to tell us about computers, and about ourselves.

But before we can get down to the nitty gritty details, we will first discuss some aspects of mathematical logic that will lay the groundwork for what Penrose has proposed. I want you to take a look at what is probably the most famous logical paradox ever written, called the Epimenides Paradox<sup>3</sup>:

**This statement is false.**

This is a self-referential statement, in that the statement to which it refers is itself. That is at the core of the paradox. If the statement is in fact false, as it states, then that must mean that the statement, "This statement is false," is actually true. But that can't be, since that conclusion is the exact opposite of what the statement actually says, thereby creating an inconsistency. You can go around and around with this. It creates an infinite logic loop. Go back and read it a few more times if you don't see it.

In 1931, Kurt Gödel wanted to transfer this statement into mathematics, actually directly into numbers. Unfortunately, at that time Alfred Tarski had shown that the notion of truth could not be captured within the confines of a formal system. What Gödel did was to replace truth with something that mathematics could handle — provability. With this

change, the Epimenides Paradox now reads:

**This statement is not provable.**

Read this carefully. Its meaning has been changed in a subtle yet very important way. We're going to look at it in two ways. First, if something is provable, then it's true. That much certainly makes sense. That would mean that if the Epimenides Paradox were provable, then it would have to be true. Right? But if it's true, according to the statement, then it is not provable. That creates an inconsistency, an infinite loop jumping around between provable and unprovable. Look back at it. The infinite loop is created by the statement's self-reference. Now, the second way to look at it is, if the statement is not provable, then what it asserts is true — this statement is not provable. That certainly is true. What this means is that something can be true but not provable.

What did Gödel show?

He showed that something can be true but not provable. We demonstrated this only with words, but he was also able to show it by using numbers (please see the references below and the references contained within them for additional details). This statement is called Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, and stated in formal logic reads:

**"For every consistent for-**



malization of arithmetic, there exist arithmetic truths that are not provable within that formal system."

Why have I gone to the trouble of explaining this to you? There is something special and very subtle about it. Think about the self-referential aspect of it. This statement is not provable. If you were a computer, all that you would have crammed into your head of transistors and wires would be a set of rules (algorithms). In that computer brain of yours, in that algorithmic brain, everything that is true can be proven. That is how your brain is built. That is how all computer brains are built. To the computer brain, if it can't be proven, then it simply isn't true. But you and your human brain can comprehend things that are true, but can't be proven. You've just done it with me. This statement is not provable — but it is true.

This is the critical point of Penrose's argument.

Because we can see that a statement is not provable but true, while an algorithmic system cannot, it means that our minds are not algorithmic.

Our minds do not operate like a computer's. The leap that Penrose makes (only one of many in the book) is that because we are self-aware, and our mind is non-algorithmic (at least some parts of our minds), while that of a computer is not, then a computer cannot be self-aware. Once again we get back to the title of the book, *The Emperor's New Mind*. What Penrose believes he has proven (see reference no. 2 for a list of some forty leading authorities in physics, artificial intelligence, and philosophy who disagree with him) is that the artificial minds that people are attempting to build simply can't be built. It's just like the emperor's new clothes. Penrose believes that all these AI people have been deluded, collectively led down a dead end into believing that self-awareness is a

spontaneous event occurring when enough computer-generated neurons are interconnected.

This might take the shape of your computer happily munching along its data, solving some unbelievably complex equations to simulate global weather patterns, when it links with some other machine, searching for more data or more memory, and that critical density of interconnectedness is finally achieved and self-awareness appears. That computer might stop calculating, and a message would fill its screen:

**I don't find this an interesting problem. I'm going to work on something else.**

This is the basis for many a science fiction story and movie: computers achieving self-awareness and then doing horrible things to us and our puny minds. But Penrose says not to worry. It can never happen.

Is that what his book is all about?

No.

That is really only the starting point. What Penrose wants to do is to get a better understanding of the human mind. Once he feels he's proven that our minds are not just an assembly of little algorithmic switches, he asks the question: What is our mind? Once again, he returns to the Gödel Theorem and our ability to recognize something as true without having actually to prove it. Penrose asks us to consider the Platonic view.

The Platonic view is one that states that mathematical concepts are in some way just "out there" waiting to be discovered.<sup>2</sup> They are fundamental truths, things of perfection and elegance that are just true. I can tell you from personal experience that scientists are driven by this concept. Some will not admit it, and some are not even aware of it. But by our training we are always seeking simple solutions, trying to find the fundamental basis for

things that often appear to be quite complex. When I am looking at a large volume of data, the data appear to have no order, no meaning. I will attempt to come up with hypotheses to explain them. Sometimes I can and sometimes I can't. But when I do, I always check to see how simple and elegant that hypothesis is. If I can only come up with some twisted, convoluted way of making my data fit, I do not trust the hypothesis. It does not feel right, does not feel true. Penrose says that this is just a manifestation of the non-algorithmic way that our minds work.

Is he right?

I just don't know.

So what is it within our brains that lets us work in this non-algorithmic manner? (Note that I did not use the word "mind." There is a world of difference between brain and mind. Brain is that three pounds of mush between your ears, while your mind is that ethereal thing that can recognize truth without actually having to prove it.) Attempting to answer this question, Penrose steps back from it and first examines physics itself to see what it is that we know and don't know about the physical world. He starts with the most elementary, Euclid's geometry and Archimedes's theory of statics, and proceeds to discuss Newton's mechanics, Maxwell's equations governing electric and magnetic fields, and then Einstein's special and general theories of relativity. Penrose looks at these various areas of physics to see if there is an aspect of them that might give clues to how our non-algorithmic brains function. He does not find any. His explanations and examples are interesting and well worth reading, but do not appear to answer his fundamental question.

Penrose then goes on to discuss quantum mechanics. It is there that he believes some clues might lie. He does not believe that the human brain is following any



quantum-mechanical behavior, in which its operation would be governed by probabilities and quantum paradoxes, such as the unknown states of some particles becoming instantly known when the states of other distant particles are measured. He looks slightly beyond the quantum world to that place between the quantum world and the macroscopic world, to that place between where an electron can tunnel through a physical barrier and where you cannot walk through a brick wall. The theory that he says must be developed in order to explain our non-algorithmic mind is that of Correct Quantum Gravity, a theory that spans the quantum and macroscopic world, one that takes general relativity (dealing with the Big Bang, the Big Crunch, black and white holes) and then quantifies it. Penrose does not attempt to make such a theory, but he does point to what he considers a very important element of it.

All the physical laws that he has described earlier, from those of Euclid's geometry up to Einstein's relativity theory, have one thing in common: that the universe does not "flow" in a preferred direction. Think about this example. There is an equation that describes the position of a ball when you drop it from your hand. The ball's distance from your hand,  $d$ , equals one half the gravitational constant,  $g$ , multiplied by the square of the time since you dropped it,  $t$ . That equation is  $d = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$ . There is no "direction" to this equation, nothing saying that once the ball is two seconds away from your hand, we can't use the equation to know where the ball was at one second after it was dropped, or where it will be at three seconds after it was dropped. All the physics Penrose has examined is symmetric with respect to time, to the now condition. But if this is true, if all the physics that we've discovered has this time symmetry to it, then What If?

why do we, why do human minds, perceive the flow of time?

Time moves forward.

We remember the past but cannot see the future.

Is there any physical law that alludes to the asymmetric way that our minds look at reality? Penrose says yes: the Second Law of Thermodynamics. This is a law that I'm sure you're aware of; you fight against it every day. It states that entropy (the measure of disorder in a system) increases in the forward time direction. Order flows to disorder. A glass hitting the floor will shatter into hundreds of fragments and will not reassemble itself if you gather up those pieces, drop them into a paper bag, and then shake it up and down a few times. Penrose asks the question: what is it that makes yesterday more ordered than today and last year more ordered than last week? His answer is the Big Bang, that point when the universe, our reality, first began: at that moment of creation things were perfectly ordered, but from that moment ran to greater and greater disorder.

Penrose makes his largest leap at this point.

The handwaving gets quite frantic.

I believe that he is trying to convince the reader that thermodynamics is asymmetric. This one-way directionality is a result of the initial ordering at the moment of the Big Bang, and any new physical laws that we have not yet discovered should incorporate this asymmetry.

And what new laws might there be?

Correct Quantum Gravity. He believes that when correct quantum gravity is understood, it will have at its core this aspect of time asymmetry.

And now we jump once more.

Penrose asks the final big question. Is there a relationship between time asymmetry, correct quantum gravity, and the non-algorithmic nature of our minds as

demonstrated by our ability to comprehend the Gödel Theorem?

Please take a deep breath.

Take several.

He says perhaps.

I say I don't know. If you read what the forty scholars in reference no. 2 think about this, they say no way. But what is much more important than whether Penrose is correct, is that he has stirred up a controversy, that he has people thinking in new directions. That is how science moves along. Yesterday's heresy becomes tomorrow's dogma.

*The Emperor's New Mind* is a very challenging book, but one that is rewarding reading. You can dip in and out of it and always find something interesting and different. If you don't understand all of it, don't worry. I don't think anyone does, including Penrose himself. In the final analysis all I can do is say that the book is incredibly twisted, and if you are the least bit curious as to why you are the least bit curious, you should read this book.

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Penrose, Roger. *The Emperor's New Mind*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Penrose, Roger (1990) *Behavioral and Brain Science*, 13(4):643.

<sup>3</sup> Casti, John L. *Searching for Certainty: What Scientists Can Know About the Future*. William Morrow and Company, 1990. □

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# Pictures from Home

By Mark Canter

Art by Peggy Ranson

**T**welve left. Twelve out of 120, homeward bound. Eleven really, because Bry isn't going to last much longer.

About a hundred beds failed outright when the system crashed. Those in stasis slipped into death; not far to fall from minimally alive — and no pain. Those were the lucky ones. Other beds partly woke us survivors.

Obviously nobody made it to normtemp or he'd have done an M.O. on the program and thawed the rest of us: eleven trapped in sub-wake; Bry fading so fast now I don't count her.

"Bingo. Got an open channel on a recon-sat above the Florida Keys." Bry is whispering into her com, slurring her words. Her voice is weakening, though her mouth and tongue are probably long past the stage of searing pain.

"Magnificent," she says. "The Keys are shimmering white like a string of pearls against the blue Atlantic. Hold for magniview: zooming in ... ah ... wait, I see a boat ... yes, locked on a dive boat; she's heading out to a coral reef. Looks like seven, make that eight divers aboard. What a day for dropping in on a reef. Golden sun, water so clear I can see the biggest fish. Dove this reef myself, honest to God, years ago. It's got a sunken hydrofoil lying on its side, home to a big nurse shark named Mighty Mom."

She's talking about Sugar Reef, her first open-water dive. I've heard this one before. Mighty Mom. How her buddies laughed their butts off when she scrambled back on deck. God, it burns when I smile. Tough it out, limber up — I'm next on the intercom.

Bry is good. For a few moments I had forgotten the constant, bottomless cold. What the oldspacers call white pain. Like my brain is floating in a bucket of CryoGen and my nerves are trees of ice. Can't move a stiff finger without feeling the scorching lava of a thousand cell walls bursting. But as soon as the burning subsides, the infinite chill swallows the site where the fire flared, and all is uniformly frigid again, a polar ocean.

Sub-wake under normal conditions is no joy drug. I hated it when it lasted, what? — all of ten minutes? A freezing zone to be endured while dropping to the blank night of stasis, and suffered again on the rise back to normtemp.

"A controlled cooling to near-death," instructor Barnes had said. Right. More like the science of

turning blood to slush. "The ache is minimized by remaining perfectly motionless," he said in my ear that first drop. "Fight it, you lose; surrender, it wins." Bastard loved to scare us.

He told us that the early crews used anesthesia to skip the agony phase of cryostasis. But the failure-to-wake rate was around eight percent then, more for long trips, New Nippon and farther. They found out when you bypass the pain of freezing, the body and brain don't adjust as efficiently to stasis as when you penguin down through the stages. Full penguin knocks the deadsleeps to less than one percent.

*Cold or old*, they say. Wish now I had chosen to age. Some manage pretty well on shorter treks. Mostly married crew who want to have the same number of wrinkles as their mates when they get home. Or brainos who spend the trek studying — three or four Ph.D.s and counting. But four years is definitely pushing it; I doubt anyone can live in a tin can that long and not start clawing at the air locks.

We all chose stasis. Colonists dropped first. Crew six weeks later. System crashed two months out-trek. Eighteen survivors: all crew, no colonists. Twelve — minus one — remaining, damned to icy purgatory. Not the hot bliss of hell where red coals bake your bones, but this blue-black arctic winter without a sun.

Five weeks since the beds failed? Bitch glitch! A gimmick for a horror sensum, but the theaters would have to carry medical insurance, like for xenoporn; only in this case, the audience would get psychosomatic frostbite, not cardiac arrest from climaxing with a nerve-orchid.

The only thing that makes the cold bearable is the knowledge that we're heading home. Two weeks, maybe three. They'll spot us approaching orbit, wonder why we don't answer tracon, and when they dock to investigate, they'll find eleven popsicles. Or whoever's left. And they'll bring us up to normtemp and I'll kiss a cop, by God.

Five weeks since Capt. Ochiba sub-woke and died the same day, a mayfly. But she lived long enough to get a fix on our position, spin the ship around, lock the navcom on home, and program the televicser for geosat link. She announced she had an omnichannel link, and the bright blue curve of Earth



filled her screen — “the living shrine of heaven” she called it. Then something in Japanese, I caught “*Sayonara*.” She transferred the satellite images to Rudd’s screen. That was it.

The captain had to have struggled in excruciating pain; just moving her fingers over the armrest keys must have felt like napalm bubbling her flesh. Tissue damage finished her. The woman’s an angel. No question. If she hadn’t located Earth and laid in a course for home, I’m sure I’d be dead by now, succumbed to the isolation of this icy coffin.

Now everybody has to wait in line to view home on his own screen. Manual control means no computer relays — only one viewscreen up at a time. The obvious way to take turns with the televiewer is by rank, since we’re all in about the same state, medically: stuck in our glacial beds, picturing the scenes the crewperson with the televiewer conveys.

Rudd didn’t last a week. I’d never say it aloud, but I was glad in a selfish way, because his reports were lackluster. I guess he knew he wasn’t going to make it home.

After Cmdr. Rudd came Lt. Vidyananda. He was worse. Just groaned a lot. Too sick to work the optics. He passed the viewer on to Frydenborg, and the ol’ chaplain was wonderful. Best by far. A real poet. Loved his stories of history and literature from peoples of different lands as he aimed the telescopes, high above. Got to be a master at it, zooming in on details, even describing the architecture: Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, New Los Angeles. It really helped — didn’t know religion and mythology could be so moving. My eyes froze shut with tears and I had to blink to break the ice — sizzling-skewer blinks.

Everyone since Frydenborg, in his turn, has been pretty damned impressive. Clewiston surprised me. Always thought the guy was about as interesting as a meteoroid drill, but as a zoologist he Q-leaped as he described the wildlife he surveyed on magniview. Learned that a giraffe and a rizork don’t just vaguely look alike; except for brain size, their internal structures are nearly congruent.

“It is not entirely incorrect to think of a rizork as a distant genetic cousin to the Terran giraffe, but of course, with an intelligence approaching that of *Homo sapiens*,” he said. Then he launched into an explanation of natural selection on Proxima A that would account for a population of intelligent giraffe-analogues. That led into his DNA-as-God metaphysics, and for the first time the Cult of the Cosmic Seed made some sense to me. “And the Code became flesh ... the Instructions lie within ... A-T-C-G spells LIFE,” and the rest. If you ignored all his “not entirely incorrect” crap, Clewiston was entertaining. Lasted three weeks, the longest show. Guess he was energized by the knowledge that his audience was captive.

Next was Bosch, geologist. Land masses and planetary forces. Told about Manhattan sinking, the destruction of L.A.; but unlike the Earth, he didn’t abide forever. \*

And now, Bry. Was hoping she’d make it home, get to know her. I’ve enjoyed her vivid descriptions of sealife she tracked on sonarview. Learned more in a week and a half listening to her than on two short treks studying oceanography on my own. Homeworld, I’ll take up diving, like we talked about — but scuba, no artificial gills. Sorry, think it makes her throat a little creepy.

My turn coming soon. I hear it in her hoarseness. My show. Don’t want to let the other ten down. Seeing Earth through each pair of eyes has kept me alive these weeks. The pictures from home have revived me on my deathbed.

Thing is, I’m no scholar or philosopher. Photovoltaic-superconductive paints — hell, half the time the tech data bores me. So, I’ll go with what I decided when I listened to the chaplain. The way he made me feel each scene, the way the memories came flooding. Watching my dad play sonicball. Hadn’t thought of that in years. So when the televiewer pops up on my screen I’ll tap TV satellites until I find a game in action.

I want to tell the others exactly how it feels to play sonicball — on a glowing summer afternoon, on the warm, green Earth. How my dad was second hoverman for the Nukes, twice MVP in the Central American League, Dome-of-Fame nominee. I’ll share my joy from 83 years ago, long forgotten.

“And that, friends,” Bry is barely audible, “is why I call her Planet Ocean ... mother of all the loves of my life ...”

Can hardly understand her. Get set. I’m next.

“My time is up ... entering the water for one last dive ... Godspeed to you all ... transferring viewer to Techmaster Ortega.”

**A**bsolute shock. That was first. Then terror and rage erupted in a scream that scorched my lungs. At some point, helplessness swallowed me, snuffed my grief under a blanket of white.

Not till then did I begin to see the beauty of it, the artistry of human kindness.

I worked my jaw. Shooting flames. But now I can talk clearly enough to be understood with a molten tongue, and the flames die as I die, but the images remain whole.

“I can see the sweat dripping off Manny O’s cheekbones. He’s brandishing the sonic as if he’s challenging the sun that glares so brightly this perfect Panamanian afternoon. Left turbo fires the ball — BLAMMO! — Ortega blasts it high over the second buoy. It’s up, up — a hoverman streaks up — no, folks, it’s *outthere!* Ortega is rounding buoy three, taking his time now, gliding down to home, wearing

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that famous solar smile. Keep your eye on him, watch — *HO!* — a victory roll."

The scenes from home are lit up like noon in the tropics, even with my eyelids frozen shut. No matter. I can see the veins bulging on the backs of my dad's hands. The gnats he sweeps away from his green eyes. Navcom data showed we're still outtrekking, away from Earth: nothing on the viewscreen but the clear black void of interstellar space. But I can see fine. ☐

## Having Seen These Marvels By Terry McGarry

*At home, storks brood in nests  
hundreds of years old,  
nests they were hatched in,  
and their mothers,  
and theirs. At home,  
hummingbirds build bottle-sized nests  
of spiderweb and lichen,  
and edible-nest swifts use  
their own saliva, as if to give  
their chicks a palpable kiss.*

*Why should I be surprised,  
four AUs from home, that you,  
all gas and membrane,  
build nests of air to raise your young,  
weaving currents of hydrogen and helium  
into a vortex in which your baby balloons  
may travel safely through the Great  
Red Spot?*

*Perhaps out in the cosmos  
there are world-sized parents  
weaving stardust round their children's  
stellar beds, nests of nebulae  
to warm them in the void;  
or maternal galaxies  
tucking solar winds around  
their coalescing young —  
spiral cradles, discus cribs ...*

*At home, I'll have grown large;  
I'll pad the crib with down  
and dreams, and then I'll marvel,  
when I hear her voice  
for the first time, and wrap her  
in my nest of flesh and bone.*

# Square Deal

## By Ted Nolan

### Art by Alan Gutierrez

Two pair. Another lousy hand. Embry discarded and drew. No improvement. She sat back and studied the faces and postures of the Ch'kk around her. After only six months among them she still didn't know their body language in anything like detail, but the essentials were clear; the Ch'kk were lousy poker players. She guessed at least a full house on her left and possibly four of a kind on her right.

Across from her, Mack was a harder read; he might even learn how to bluff some day. She suspected, though, that he had her beat, too. He seemed at ease in the presence of his superiors; their discomfort in associating with him was obvious. Cashiered from their Fleet academy for relentlessly questioning the hidebound strategy and tactics of the Ch'kk fleet, and attempting a love affair above his station, Mack was the most promising Ch'kk Embry had met, and she had used all the pull her promises of a Terran alliance gave her to have him reinstated. The other officers had to accept it, but they made no secret of how they felt.

"Raise five." Embry pushed the chips across the low table into the pot, keeping her own face as impassive as she could. The pile she anted from was the largest at the table, the shiny square tokens reflecting the glow tubes in the low ceiling.

"Meet," from her right.

Mack considered his cards carefully, then said, "See and raise five."

"Fold," from her left.

"Raise ten." Embry lifted one of the large checkered tokens and threw it in.

"Fold." The Ch'kk on her right threw his hand down in disgust.

Mack hesitated several long moments, then, "Fold."

Embry raked the chips into her stack. "Well, gentlemen?" she asked. "Another hand?"

"Enough," growled the Ch'kk on her left. "It is plain that random events favor us not tonight." He stood up from the table and made his way to the door. The other officer, less senior, followed his lead.

Mack sat after they had left — unseemly to follow too closely. He fidgeted for a moment, then looked up at Embry. "Do you imagine you help your cause by beating Captains of the Fleet?" he asked finally.

"I play to win," Embry said. "Always. I can't ever be part of the Fleet Families network, and I won't get their respect by trying. They need my advice on

what works in this war; they need the alliance with my people. Their warning reminds them of that."

"To be disliked still can be no advantage."

"That doesn't sound like the young dirt-family Ch'kk who was going to rewrite *The Grand Deployment Manual* and court Captain Kh'tt's daughter for firstmate come hell or high water."

"And see where it had gotten me — stripped of honor, severed from the Academy and nearly shunned. Except for my great alien benefactor, my life would be a shambles still."

Embry frowned. Was that a note of sarcasm? It was hard to be sure, and she *did* need Mack. Needed one Ch'kk who understood the strategies she was trying to sell. Strategies that could keep Commonality forces tied up here at Ch'kk, away from Sol and the Sisters. "You have good ideas," she said. "The best I've seen here. I couldn't let that go to waste." And maybe, she thought, he reminded her of herself, a bright ambitious Academy student unlucky in love. Not that she could ever tell him that — if they ever suspected her true status, any chance she had of influencing Ch'kk policy would be shot to hell.

"Perhaps," he said. "And perhaps the Fleet will surrender the next time the Commonality damps in, despite all your grand strategies and alliances, despite my 'good ideas.'" He laid his cards out on the table: four tens. He looked Embry in the eye and asked, "And what do you hold, Embry tell one?"

"The winner," Embry said, "doesn't have to tell." She fancied he looked rather thoughtful as he left.

As the door slid closed behind him, she picked up a double-handful of chips and rattled them around. Too bad they weren't money. Too bad none of this had done a damn thing to fight the Commonality so far, or to get her back home. She thought it was spring in the Low Country, though it was impossible to tell without her chron, and that was long gone, left behind in her escape from the Commonality during the first battle for Ch'kk. The thought of wisteria-draped trees and the scent of honeysuckle was reason enough to believe in spring, though, so she lay back and let the knots in her stomach dissolve as she remembered what she was fighting for, and what made all the politics and lies worthwhile — Embry thought of Earth, and after a while she smiled.





The scene in the war room was chaos when Embry arrived. Ch'kk were rushing everywhere, and over everything hung the feel of impending doom and resignation that she had come to know only too well during her time on Ch'kk. She searched through the roar and scuffle, looking for the Fleet admiral. She found him at a tridem tank, stricken at what it revealed. Embry stared blankly for a moment as her mind made sense of the Ch'kk idea of perspective, then took in the story the tank displayed.

At the edge of the system, far enough out of the central gravity well to shed flux safely, a Commonality fleet was damping in. Four more dots appeared as she counted. A big fleet, bigger than the one that had destroyed her training ship and devastated the Ch'kk fleet.

The point of view was from insystem; the information had to be hours old. "Do you have any probes jumped out there?" she asked the Fleet admiral. He didn't seem to hear. "Probes," she repeated. "We need current information."

"So many," the admiral whispered. "We knew, we knew."

Embry reached down and shook the admiral very gently. "Do ... you ... have ... any ... probes ... there?"

"No," he replied finally. "They didn't come that way last time."

Embry made a very conscious effort and let him go instead of strangling him. "Don't you think perhaps that you should send some?"

"What's the point?" he said. "Look at that. Twice as many ships as last time they have sent, at least, and almost our whole fleet was destroyed driving them back then."

The Ch'kk were a pleasant people. Embry liked them. They smelled good, their fur was soft and silky, and even their most mundane manufactures were beautiful. They were also a race in bad need of a backbone. Or a man on horseback.

"It is," Embry reminded him, "your job."

The situation was a little clearer hours later in the briefing room. Embry was there in her capacity as defacto Terran ambassador. The Fleet admiral was there too, and most of the civilian world government and clan elders.

After a short invocation of the clan overspirit, the admiral began. "The situation is dire," he said. "At the edge of the gravity slope are gathered fully two and a half times as many ships as we faced during the battle of a sixmonth ago. Our probes find them to be, in general, more concentrated in the heavier classes than was the case then also. Our own fleet is still at quarter strength, and will remain below our previous level for at least two more sixmonths. Even at full strength, we could not exploit our ships' drive advantage, as warppoints are very scarce in

the region. In short, I must report that we have no significant defenses in advance of the homeworld orbital batteries. Our plight is, in my opinion and that of my peers, without hope." He sank back to the floor slowly, as though afraid of breaking.

Embry sat and listened as the government and clan elders carried on a spirited dialogue. It was too fast and heated for her to follow, but she nonetheless sensed the emerging consensus. They were going to surrender.

Embry stood, an eighteen-year-old T.E.F. Academy senior addressing the leaders of a world. Someone had to. She'd had to kill David. She could do this too — for Earth. "Gentlemen," she said, "you forget you don't have to defeat this force. If you can just hold them, when we make contact with my people, we can have vast fleets at your disposal in days." The lie burned her throat as it passed, and the knot in her gut came back. Earth and the Three Sisters were pressed harder than the Ch'kk. But she had to keep Ch'kk morale up, keep them fighting. Every Commonality ship here was one less on the Solar blockade.

The Chancellor spoke for the Ch'kk consensus. "Always you have promised great things, tall one. Here a full sixmonth after you came to us, where are your fleets? You cannot even find your home star."

"The astronomers look constantly," Embry responded. "With the information I have given them, it is only a matter of time until I can contact my people."

"Time," the chancellor spoke with finality, "which we do not have. If we surrender now, we will do our clans a greater good than if we continue this slaughter to no point."

"It doesn't work that way," Embry said. "An occupation by the Commonality is never lenient."

"We are decided."

"Wait!" She couldn't let them give up. Earth needed allies too badly, even unwitting ones. "Give me ten ships and a sixday before you do this thing. Once done it cannot be undone."

"To what purpose?" This from the admiral.

"I intend," Embry said, "to win your damned battle for you."

It was cramped in the little ship. Embry occupied the place that would normally be held by two Ch'kk. In her tridem tank, the Commonality fleet seemed complete; there had been no new arrivals for almost a day. After it finished regrouping it would start to move insystem — if she let that happen.

Eight other ships had followed her through the warppoint and then to the surface of the small comet. There hadn't been time to make a vacsuit for her, so Embry had to sit and watch the screens as the activity outside proceeded.

"Ship one, report." The Ch'kk didn't name their

ships.

"Excavation commencing as planned," came back the reply. "Estimated completion one sixhour."

On the external video, Embry watched as the unlikely spectacle of space ships burying themselves nose first in the surface of the comet began to unfold. Luckily the gravity here was negligible. More lucky still that the conservative Ch'kk held on to the sleek rocket shape that had first brought their ancestors into space.

Each ship in turn reported satisfactory progress as the engineers melted and blasted the necessary silos. Finally her flagship too joined the others in their bizarre ostrich posture. Phase one was complete.

"Lock helms," Embry commanded. "Go ahead to my console." The blue lights came up one by one until all units were showing locked and ready. "Engaging," she said, touching the master icon.

Drives came on. Infinitesimally at first, exerting only enough thrust to seat the ships in their silos, they began to build slowly. Very gradually the comet began to change course.

This ought to get their attention, she thought.

The amount of delta vee needed to bring the comet into the Commonality fleet grouping was not impossible; neither was it small. Depending on how much of it fell apart or melted, Embry's computers estimated it would take fully two days to reach the enemy fleet. Not that she expected to reach it — reports from newly dispatched outlying probes showed that the fleet was already taking some notice. Good.

Two scouts broke off from the fleet formation and began to accelerate towards Embry's snowball. "Estimated time to effective range?" she asked the navigator.

"Four hours with current acceleration." Rabbits to the comet's snail.

"Good. Wake me in three hours, or on any significant change. And prepare the ship for extraction." She didn't feel at all like sleeping, but establishing herself as unflappable was almost as important as winning. If only her damn cabin were big enough to stretch out in.

In fact, the navigator came for her after two hours. She woke from a bad dream, sweaty and confused: David in her sights again, begging her to pull the trigger. She got a grip on herself and shook the moment of panic. "Situation?" she asked.

"No change in the arrival projection," he said, "but ..."

"Yes."

"There's a, uh, *situation* on ship four."

"A situation. What kind of situation?" Why was the Ch'kk beating around the bush?

"Maybe you'd better talk to them."

Square Deal

She wiped the sleep from her eyes and followed him back to the bridge. Better to handle it there.

"Command to ship four. Status report."

"Acting Captain Hkttk reporting; our situation is under control." The voice was familiar, the name one she had never been able to pronounce. Mack?!

"Mack," Embry said, "what happened to Captain Kh'tt?"

There was a long silence. "He, um, lost confidence in the overall conduct of the mission. I have taken ... over for him."

She remembered Kh'tt. From an old Fleet family, he had even less imagination than most Ch'kk and no love for the tall alien in whose command he found himself. Not one of her choices. And what the hell was Mack doing there? She hadn't assigned him to Kh'tt. The old man already hated him with a passion. Mack would surely never win his daughter now... Best not to press him on any of that; he was on her side — she thought. "Ship four remains mission-worthy?"

"Completely."

"Carry on ... Captain."

All ships! Disengage!" Embry touched the icon and felt the small flutters of acceleration as her ship backed gingerly from the pit. The viewscreens were white with the vaporized gas, a comet tail two hundred years ahead of schedule. Time to leave the nest.

"Systems status," she demanded as they floated free.

"All blue," her first replied. "Ship three reports negligible damage from an unsecured vacsuit tank."

"Understood." They were lucky so far. "Enemy status?"

"Still closing. Engageable."

Embry nodded. Time to show the Commonality that this worthless snowball was defended to the teeth. "All ships. Engage and destroy enemy scouts." Her little squadron eased out from behind the comet and began to bracket projected paths for the Commonality scouts with beams and pellets. Working over light-second distances, neither side ever had a true picture of the situation, but numbers were on Embry's side, for once.

"Ship four, target destroyed," Mack reported, and soon thereafter ship six scored a crippling hit on the second scout. Embry breathed a sigh of relief. They had managed to establish the comet as well defended and possibly dangerous without taking any losses.

"Enemy status report," she demanded.

"Fleet reforming along projected lines." Good; she could rely on Commonality fleet reflex until someone over there came up with a real plan to take out her snowball. She plotted the paths again in the tridim. The comet was a little off. "Ship five, re-

engage comet and correct to new projection."

Ship five gingerly nosed back in, and the real and ideal course lines for the comet merged in the tank. Now the waiting began once more.

The Commonality fleet approached the comet warily. Anything that size, capable of independent motion and defended by at least a half dozen of the natives' scarce ships, was a potential threat, one that by all rights should not have been there, and, at any rate, not one to leave behind the lines as the fleet moved insystem. Fully twenty scouts probed, and five cruisers formed a rear guard, sniffing for whatever Ch'kk installation the comet might contain.

"Enemy in position — now," Com reported.

"All ships! Engage enemy units as per plan," Embry ordered.

Once again the handful of Ch'kk ships came swarming from behind the comet: this time, however, the numbers were not with them. They darted and dodged as fast as Newton and Hawking would allow, but there was no way it could be enough.

Embry watched the tridem tank intently, oblivious to the jerks and plummets of a grav compensator stretched to overload. The main body of the Commonality fleet was holding well back, lest the comet be revealed as some sort of Ch'kk trap. The advance guard was proving to be more than enough for the defenders.

One of the symbols in the tridem overlay vanished in a flash of white.

"Status report, ship two," Embry demanded.

"Ship two does not answer." Their first casualty.

"Time remaining?"

"Six lwan and one." About ten minutes.

"Maintain engagement." The lopsided battle went on.

Another flash. "Ship five not responding." Good people, she knew, who had died on her say-so. For Earth, she reminded herself, for Earth. Every Commonality ship here was one less there. Every Ch'kk casualty — she squelched the thought.

"Boxed! We're boxed!" The shout from fire control came almost simultaneously with the hoot of the collision alarm. Some combination of Commonality ships had laid a pattern of pellets that it was impossible to avoid. She felt the first "thunk" as the ship started to spin wildly and the lights went out. Her head knocked hard against the low ceiling and she didn't feel the second one, or hear the awful sound of air rushing into vacuum in the silence that followed.

Embry woke, confused and scared. Was she a prisoner again? No, the lights favored the now-familiar spectrum and revealed traditional Ch'kk paneling, not the drab featurelessness of Commonality bulkheads. She turned her head and saw

a Fleet emergency evac sack; built for two Ch'kk, it would have just fitted her. She gathered her forces and sat up.

"Are all you tall ones so fragile?"

"Mack?" Memories came rushing back. "The fleet, the battle. What happened?"

Mack stepped through the cabin door and sat down on the deck across from her. "The battle is over; your plan worked perfectly. The tenth ship was able to boost constantly after warping in two light days away. By the time it hit the battle zone and released the ball bearings, its inverse tau was so immense that the Commonality fleet had never a chance. We estimate ninety-six percent losses before they were able to withdraw." He made the sign invoking the clan overspirit. "Ship six was slow to leave the danger zone when the time came. It too was caught in the volley."

More blood. "And my crew?"

"Five dead. The rest live, though two barely."

Better than thirty percent losses, she thought. A heavy toll indeed. Necessary, she told herself. Time bought for Earth.

"They'll be back," Embry said. "We've hit them this hard once or twice in my system. They don't give up. They're missionaries."

"Yes," Mack agreed, "but we know now that they aren't unstoppable. We Ch'kk will think of something." He paused. "And understand, Embry tall one, I am the hero of this victory. I drew first blood for my clan. While your ship was dark and silent, I directed the battle. This I have done, and made sure that all understand it. You saved me when I was a lever, pushing without a place to stand. I have that now, and I will lead. Your help is welcome — we will extend alliance to your people, if you ever find them, but we will be more than cannon fodder for them."

"I never thought —" Embry began.

"You did," Mack said. "I would have in your place, and we are much alike. Understand me, I feel no joy in playing Prime Mover, but the spirit of the clans is slow, and someone must rouse it — and it cannot be you. Now rest more, for we have much to plan."

"You goaded Kh'tt into mutiny, didn't you?" The revelation broke on her like a winter storm, chilling to the bone. A man who could kill his only chance for love was — a man like her. The thought burned, and she was suddenly very tired. "And those pellets," she whispered, "that holed our ship — were those yours?"

"The winner," Mack said, "doesn't have to tell." He stood and left Embry alone in the cabin.

She wiped the clotted blood from around her nose and lay back again. Another lousy hand. But the stakes were high — and she knew how to bluff. □

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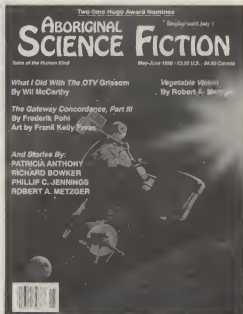


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# The Curse

By Anthony R. Lewis

Art by Larry Blamire

Welcome to Ireland, Kathleen O'Malley," the EC customs officer said, as he ran her passport through the scanner. "Dublin, 9 April 2020," was written into the passport's memory. "From Boston, and 'tis your first visit here. A word, enjoy yourself in the Republic but avoid the North."

"I thought it was quiet now that Yildiz Bircik Pasha was running it for the Community."

"Oh, quiet it is; but peaceful it's not. You'd think those bureaucrats in Aachen would know better than to appoint a *Sunni* ..." He sighed and waved her on.

She picked up her rental car and headed to her hotel. Irish drivers were the model of courtesy compared to those of her home. But then, that could be said of almost any city on Earth. Boston drivers did not think of driving as transportation — but as a blood sport.

The hotel was as plastic as the EC ecus. She could have been in Boston, Los Angeles, or any American city. Even the pictures on the wall were mass-produced. The tours were just as plastic. The tour guide's brogue was so thick she was certain he had no Irish ancestry at all. It seemed to delight the other tourists. Two Dublin tours later she decided to skip the "Ould Sod Special" and see things for herself.

Kathleen wandered. She was tired of the template tours. She took her small car and drove west, turning at intersections according to the flipping of a coin. She stopped when she wanted to and walked. The land here was moist and green and beautiful in the late Saturday sun. She avoided the paths and stepped over stone fences in the full knowledge that she was trespassing.

"And what would such a lovely colleen be doing here all by herself?" She turned and saw a child. No, it was a small man dressed in an archaic style. Was there some tourist pageant being held nearby? She hoped not; it was the sort of event she was trying to avoid.

"Are you in costume? You're dressed so funny." That was discourteous of her.

"Funny? How should I be dressed? I've a cap on my head, a shirt on my body, trousers on my legs, and hose and shoon on my feet. That's how I dress. That's how I've always dressed. Now how is that being funny?" He seemed more amused at her than annoyed. "But it's me that's being rude," and with

that he swept off his cap and bowed to her.

The cap had covered his head and most of his ears — ears that were pointed and rose above the top of his balding head. She blurted out, "You're an elf."

"An elf?" He twisted his hat in his hands and looked about as if for aid. "Lord God, Ruler of the Universe, I hope you didn't hear that. Here we are, standing in the greenish field of the Emerald Isle, with me clad all proper for Your Sabbath, and the young lady thinks I'm an elf. Do they teach them nothing these days in their schools? Oh, it's cruelly insulting for a self-respecting leprechaun to be named an elf — not that I've anything against elves — but 'tis not my family."

"You can't be a leprechaun; they don't exist."

"Well, since you're so knowing and all, I'll not have you wasting your time talking to non-existent people. So I'll bid you the peace of God's Sabbath and be on my way." He turned to go.

"No, no, please wait." She stumbled after him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"No offense taken if no offense's meant. But I'd best be off; I've a ways to go."

"I could give you a ride. My car's just over that rise."

"Thank you, but no. 'Tis walking only on the Sabbath for me."

"But today's Saturday, not Sunday." She was puzzled.

"Correct. I'm on my way home from the morning services."

A light dawned. "You're Jewish. But leprechauns aren't Jewish ..." She wound down.

"For someone who doesn't believe in leprechauns, you're knowing much about us. I'm Jewish, and some are Catholics, and so on. Same as with you people. Now I'll be on my way."

He turned to go, but she stepped forward and grasped his arm. There was the feel of latent strength buried in its thinness. "You can't go yet." She rummaged through her childhood memories. "You have to give me something now that I've captured you — gold, or a wish. Isn't that true?"

"Now, if it's a wish you'll be wanting, then you'll be waiting for the sunset, for no work will I do on the Sabbath no matter how beautiful the young lady who asks. But you will get your wish; that's on my



honor as a true leprechaun of Eire."

She blushed. "I'm not beautiful."

"No? Well, as I said, you do know so much that's not true. But to the point. Would you be pleased to share my food?"

"Fairy food?" Having read more fantasy than her parents approved of, she knew to be wary of gifts from supernatural creatures.

"By all the fathers and mothers of Israel, first it's an elf I am and now a fairy. This is good solid Irish food — fit for human or leprechaun." With that he brought a woven basket into sight and began unpacking it.

"Isn't this work?"

"No, it's pleasure. Now eat and forget your amateur tries at being a theologian." The leprechaun stopped talking. She watched as a huge portion of beef stew vanished into him. She took a bowl and scooped some for herself. It was delicious. A glass of wine appeared at her side. It was too sweet.

They sat and ate and talked the day away. Soon the third star had appeared in the sky and the Sabbath had ended. "Now, let's be talking of your wish. I warn you — it can't be against nature, nor a logical impossibility, nor unjust."

"I didn't have anything illegal in mind," she protested.

"Oh, it could be illegal as long as it's not unjust." He smiled at her.

She blurted it out, knowing that if she thought about it she would realize it was too naïve for consideration. "Please solve the Irish problem."

"There is no Irish problem. There's only an English problem exported here some centuries ago."

Sadly, "Then you can't do it." She paused. "Then what I want —"

He interrupted her with a raised hand. "I didn't say we couldn't do it. We could always have done it."

"Why didn't you?"

"It's being this way. We're forbidden," he looked about, "let's be saying, by a high authority, to interfere in the doings of mankind. But now that you've asked —"

"Now you wait. Won't this still be interference? And are you saying that no one ever asked for this before?"

"Maybe and yes. It's sad I am to be saying that only you Americans go around wondering how you can help others. For the most part, we are satisfied if we're not asked to harm people."

"You didn't answer my first question."

"True, true. There's a balance. I'm owing you a wish and you've made one that's not unnatural, impossible, nor unjust (merely difficult). And every wish has some impact on you humans. But since it's you who's the efficient cause (to quote a Jesuit friend of mine), then it's your karma (to quote a Buddhist

friend)." He smiled at her. "We'll get to work on it immediately. I'll not be denying that it's something we'd like to see done. The land does not need the violence it's seen these centuries past. Seeing Irishman against Irishman is not something we like. You should have come a bit sooner — say 1895."

"What are you going to do?"

"Lass, better that you don't know. Be here at high noon on May Day." With that he vanished, taking with him all the oddments of their meal. Kathleen shook her head and headed back to her car, walking slowly in the growing dark.

**D**ateline: 30 April 2020, Aachen, European Capital District. In a surprise announcement today, President Vigdis Gudrunsdottir said that all Turkish troops would begin leaving the former northern Ireland area tomorrow upon its unification with the Republic. This will call for new parliamentary by-elections in the reconstituted province of Ulster. The President said that this rapid turn of events was a vindication of the policies of her administration. She had no comment as to whether Irish troops might be sent to control the communal strife in Cyprus.

**K**athleen had decided that her supernatural interview was a fantasy brought on by too much wishful thinking when she saw the morning papers. High noon, she thought. I can make it if I hurry.

It was the same place she had been before. It was one of those perfect Spring days from which poets extract the essence to be used in October and November. The leprechaun was standing in the field waiting for her.

"How did you know I'd really come back?"

He smiled. "Oh, some things are destined. Did it never occur to you just why a young tourist from Boston would be meeting up with a leprechaun?" He smiled once again. She decided that she did not care to probe too deeply into this. She was glad when he changed the subject.

"And now that the centuries of foreign rule and sundering are ending and the Island is One again, we've decided that you should be getting another wish for yourself. So, what would you be having of us, Kathleen?"

"I don't want anything for myself. Magic luck isn't real — not real in the inner way. But there is something I would like for my family and friends back home in Boston." Then she knelt and whispered in his ear. The request seemed so ludicrous, even to herself, that she was shamed to speak it aloud.

"Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!" The little man whirled about widdershins. "It's no easy task that you are setting for us. That's a century-old bane, it



is — The Curse of the Bambino. Still, with all the leprechauns in all of Ireland working on it, I'll not be saying it can't be done. And if it's to be done at all, it'll be done Irish — with poetry."

She bent down and kissed him on the forehead, causing the most amazing blush to cover his face. "You're a good child," he said. "Go with God. Shalom."

She watched as he faded back into the Irish mist and peat. She turned and walked towards her car and America.

It was October 2020, and Kathleen was sitting behind third base at Fenway Park in Boston. This was the seventh game of the World Series, and the Red Sox had just returned from Chicago tied three all with the Cubs. She worried because it was the bottom of the ninth and the Sox were trailing 4 to 2. A look at the scorecard didn't reassure her. First up was Dave Cooney, the pitcher. He tapped the ball to the infield and was thrown out at first. Kevin Barrows was up next, the top of the order. He had hit respectably throughout the Series, but he, too, was out on a grounder. So much for leprechauns, she thought. The next two batters had not gotten a hit between them in seven games.

Well, it's not over until the last man is out. Sean Flynn hit late at the first pitch and punched a single over the shortstop's head. The crowd began to stir but settled back when they saw that Jimmie Blake was approaching the batter's box. There would have been a substitution if anyone else had recovered

from the currently modish flu. On a 2-0 pitch Blake swung from his heels, putting a screaming line drive between left and center. When things had settled down, he was on second and Flynn was on third.

But things hadn't settled down in the crowd because the clean-up hitter, Kenneth C. ("Casey") Jones, was coming to the plate. The Cubs' pitcher stepped off the mound and waited for five minutes while the umpire got things quiet again. The Cubs' manager wanted a new pitcher, but his bullpen had been devastated by the same flu. The entire game had become a duel between two men. Jones stood by for a called strike. He shook his head slightly. The pitcher shook off two calls by the catcher and threw. Again, Jones refused to swing. Again, it was a called strike. The noise of the crowd was a living thing, terrible to hear. Jones stepped back and raised his hand for silence and, wonders, he got it.

All was now riding on a single pitch. The pitcher took his windup and threw. Kathleen felt time stop. This was the numinous moment, the time when the world beyond the world became visible. As the ball crawled platewards, Jones began his swing. She saw every instant of it until the solid sound of connection came to her ears. Time started again. As if ordained, the ball rose higher and higher, farther and farther. No one even looked — all knew that it was gone. The Red Sox had won their first World Series in a century. And with that victory, the Curse of the Bambino, the onus laid upon the team when it had traded George Herman Ruth to the New York Yankees, was lifted. And all was as it should have been. □

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# The Silver Abacus

By Paul C. Schuytema

Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

With the darkness comes the bitter cold, and with the cold comes the familiar, deadening ache in the joints of Tokira's eight fingers. Even from the stumps of his other two, severed just below the knuckles for crimes he cannot remember, he still feels the ghostly pain of his rheumatism.

Wind blows sharply through the honey-combed walls of his hut, causing the dirty foam disks he sleeps upon to banter and flicker like angry fleas. He rubs his shoulders against the cold.

Wrapping his mylar cloak tight around his pack, Tokira Assan steps out into the star-flecked night of Bara-neetal. Small lights flicker here and there throughout the squatters' sprawl. Some are fires, some are the soft, white glow of solar lanterns. Tokira keeps to the shadows, his shoulders hunched, and heads toward the twin glass towers that long ago were home for the company men, the government men, and the lobbyists. Tokira remembers that time only vaguely, though when he lets his fingers slide unconsciously across the polished silver beads of his abacus he can say with complete certainty that it was less than thirty-three years ago.

The gurgled crying of an unhealthy baby makes him stop for a moment. Over the murmur of the wind, the baby chokes again. A sound coming from the darkness, the cry of a daylight-child, born under the hot spasms of the yellow sun that eats the oxygen from the air and turns tender skin a blistered purple. Tokira tries to find that long-ago emotion, to feel sorrow and pity for the baby. He knows that he too had a child, once. But the shadows whisper to him and he turns away, still rubbing the stumps of his aching fingers.

He is hungry again, and he prays that this time his empty stomach will not betray him as before. He presses his fists hard into his abdomen, his almond eyes wincing in pain. Quietly, very quietly, he slides up against the broken glass of the first tower, moving along the wall of windows. His back pressed flat, he looks to the sky.

Stars by the millions litter the purple darkness, all small, all weak. Some flicker in the bluish glass of the tower, making an imperfect copy of the frail night. A flash appears in the sky, growing bright then fading. Tokira recognizes it as lantern-light glimmering through broken windows of the tower floors where squatters now live.

He wishes, for a moment, that he could have taken one of the higher floors. Kept it all to himself. At night he could look out over the darkness of the cliff, where no river runs any more, or across the crippled and lonely city of Bara-neetal, and see small lights like grounded stars echo the empty stars above.

But his legs and lungs were not strong enough after his sickness, and only the strong hold territory in the towers. Even those in the broken tower are far stronger than he. It is a fate he feels he has accepted a thousand years before.

Tokira slides silently along the jagged glass wall, his eyes on a flickering lantern ahead. At the edge of the sprawl sits a small hut, aluminum walls lashed together with human hair. An old woman lies inside. Only her distended belly is visible beyond the plastic curtain. On a small crate is the lantern, its oily light casting shadows over three loaves of bread and a darkened, charred hock of meat that a thin man pokes with a blade. Behind the hut there is a pen, fenced in hand-made barbed wire. Seven very hungry dogs pace behind the twisted wire, their eyes catching the glow of the lantern as they circle. Tokira can hear their teeth scrape against the bones of a comrade, slaughtered earlier this night. And still they are hungry.

Tokira takes a deep breath, reaching into his pouch and pulling out a smooth pebble the size of his fist. Running his thumb across the surface, he remembers the river in a flash of photo-accurate memory, and for that moment he pauses, listening to the sound of the water, the moss, the tiny insects skirting across the taut surface. It feels like a poem would feel, if Tokira's mind would slow enough for him to read, or like a perfectly executed series of brush strokes, representing all but showing so little. Tokira throws the stone.

It clatters noisily over a sheet of bent aluminum, sending the dogs into a barking frenzy. Already Tokira's mouth is watering. The thin man, gaunt in the light of the lantern he swings by his side, steps out of the hut to quiet the dogs.

"Goddamn mutts! You've had twice your share already. Now shut up!"

The dogs yelp and jump at the light as Tokira slips through the plastic curtain. In the darkness,



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he can smell the woman's fear. She remains silent. He snatches two slender baker's loaves and tucks them into his cloak, leaving the meat and the last loaf of bread. He never steals all that a family has; he wishes only to eat. Brushing past the confused man, he darts into the shadows, slides along the building's foundation and over to the cliff.

Lowering himself slowly, his legs burning from the short sprint, he dangles them over the darkened abyss. Behind is the sickly port city of Bara-neetal, struggling through another night, and in front is darkness, cool and empty.

No stars reflect in the dry river-bed two kilometers below; no arc-lights blaze from the space-port across the ravine. There is nothing now but dark and silent sand, gathering in gentle sloping dunes. Taking a bite from the dry bread, chewing slowly, Tokira knows he sits on the brink, an edge as sharply defined as any in their shrinking universe, an edge between entropy and oblivion. For a moment, Tokira thinks of pushing gently with his eight fingers, letting his old and wrinkled body fall silently into that oblivion, and for an instant he flexes his arms.

Then the pain in his belly reminds him of his needs, of his life; the fog in his brain, almost tangible in the cold and total darkness, reminds him that behind that fog are memories of a life he once had. Memories of love and sharing, of fatherhood and future, of the metallic smell of a cooling hull after a Transom-jump, of dusty ores and algae, and of his fingers gliding like doves over the smooth beads of his silver abacus, calculating positions in an infinite confusion of stars.

His hands reach inside his pouch and touch the cool beads again. A connection is drawn, for a moment the haze clears, and Tokira feels the reality, the actuality of his past. And in a breath, it is gone. All that remains is dry thirst and hunger, the two constants of Bara-neetal.

He eats half of the other loaf, saving the rest for the need that will return again. He must steal once more this night, then the pain will recede until dawn, until the next night when he must begin again. Struggling to his feet, he spits a dry mouthful over the cliff. A small offering for the oblivion that will always be waiting for him.

Cautiously, he steps to the corner of the large tower and peers around the broken edge. The second glass tower stands in a blaze of electric light. The windows are broken in places, but instead of dark cracks, they are repaired with plastic and scrap aluminum, giving a patchwork appearance. A tall fence surrounds the compound, twisted wire alive with electricity. Tokira knows the fence well. Once, when the need, the hunger, drove him to the wild edge, he tried to climb the fence, tried to get at the food they hoarded inside. He is not completely sure,

but has fine wisps of memory of them snipping his finger, of screaming and pressing against the hot blood, and then not caring, but eating, eating all he could as the food mingled with his blood and the men laughed and kicked and tried to get him to eat his own finger. Beyond that, he cannot remember a thing.

Guards pace the compound, guns on their shoulders, jeering at the faces crowding around the gates, begging for a handout, begging for charity from those who hoard it all. Tokira turns away in disgust.

He does not beg. That much is clear in the fog of his life. He will never beg. He turns to the other tower, with the crumbling frame and shattered windows, and steps through a broken ridge of glass into a silent, sleeping world of twisted bodies and whimpering nightmares. A lantern flashes on for a moment, the cool electric light freezing the chaotic world in deep shadow outlines. Then darkness again. Tokira rubs his eyes, trying to erase the retinal after-image of a world he would rather forget. From the far corner come muted whispers. Silhouettes against the broken glass reveal three men, standing, heads bobbing, guns resting on hunched shoulders.

Tokira moves silently away from them, between the sleeping bodies, through a door and up thirteen steps. Maybe tonight, the stairs will be clear, maybe tonight he will not have to ...

"All right, Pops, you know the price. Just like usual."

The spikes hammered into Philio's club glimmer like running water as he spins it in front of Tokira's face. His good leg blocks the second landing, and he flexes it, pushing Tokira back, down several stairs. Tokira looks up into the young, purple-splotched face and feels only pity. He wishes, as he looks into eyes the color of blood, that Philio could have been spared this world.

"Come on, come on ... not like the night will last forever."

Tokira reaches into his pouch and pulls the half-loaf out, presenting it with two fingers, and his stomach churns automatically as Philio snatches it away and pushes it into his dark, wet mouth.

"Not so stale as usual, old man. Been raiding the baker's huts?"

Tokira only bows his head. He understands that a silent man causes no trouble. He pushes past the legs.

"Well, let's hope you have some luck tonight. My stomach is never full enough."

Tokira leaves Philio at the stairs, a toll-keeper in the house of the poor. Three more stairs and his legs burn, the thin oxygen absorbing into his hungry lungs, with none to spare to feed the ancient muscles. Tonight, it will be the fourth level, as far

as Tokira is able to climb. He rests often, once squatting next to the body of a man wrapped in cracking mylar, unsure whether he only sleeps, or has found his own oblivion. Still, hunger drives him on.

The moldy canvas walls hanging from the girders smell ripe with mildew. Tokira crouches low, holding his pack tight, silent. There is light ahead, electric light, meaning wealth, food. An opportunity. The rest of the floor appears empty; there he hears no restless movement of sleep, no empty words, except from the light behind the canvas ahead. There is a woman's voice, gentle and cooing. The sound lures Tokira forward.

He peers around the canvas wall. A woman, young and dark, rocks a baby, bringing it to her breast. She murmurs soothingly as her hand cups the small, wispy head. Near her, a young man squats over paper, making marks with a stick of charcoal. Thin blue lines on the paper make Tokira think of the stream, of the light blue water dancing like the lines of a poem. He shakes this from his mind and turns to look at the small aluminum chest, open, filled with canned goods, small vacuum-sealed packages and vials of red liquid, treasures from the past. It is enough for them all, enough for the four of them. Then Tokira's mind returns to Philio, and the glistening club. He will have to lower his pack to the ground before he reaches the final flight, telling Philio that tonight was bad, a lean night for everyone.

"If only I had the whole sheet, then we would know where the conduits lead ... the cliff is too steep, there must be another way, if only we could know ..."

The man's voice sounds confident, clear.

Tokira reaches into his pack, pulling another river cobble out, along with a piece of bent and polished aluminum. He steps behind the wall, silently, and moves through the shadows of the canvas. He raises the stone, poising, aiming at a sheet of cracked but unbroken glass, and lets the stone fly. Before it even hits, Tokira has dissolved into the shadows, and then the window shatters, the sound resounding through the cement and iron framework.

As Tokira expects, the man bolts past him to see about the disturbance, and Tokira shrinks with the shadows, then explodes into the room, brandishing the cut aluminum like a machete. He anticipates the woman's fear, her cowering and protection of the baby as he slides to the chest, preparing to take only what he needs. He does not plan on her screaming.

The sound of her cry makes him freeze, only for an instant, but it is long enough for the young man to burst in, to dive for Tokira's feet, to throw him to the ground with such force that his pack spills to the concrete. His head hits hard, splitting. His eyes are

The Silver Abacus

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blurred with blood as the man is on top of him, twisting his arm behind his back, making him wince with pain. Tokira feels the pain, and with it he feels shame. He has been foolish.

"Goddamn thief! A goddamn old man thief!"

The woman is standing now, holding tight to the crying baby. Tokira tries to turn his head, but the man's foot holds it firm.

"Shit. Ceil, get me the charger, quick."

Tokira is released, a long wand pointed in his face; two copper and green patinated electrodes protrude like fangs. He slides up against the wall.

"What am I going to do with you? What am I going to do with an old thief like you?"

"Look. Look at his hand."

"So you've been sloppy before, trying to get what isn't yours."

Tokira feels his lips tighten, fighting back a reply. He moves to cover his hand, the stumps that ache in the cold night.

"You bastard."

The man presses the wand into Tokira's belly, and he feels the electricity explode into his chest, hot, like fire, but cold like ice. It streams out to his toes, to his head, to his fingers, burning like acid, making his body jump and his mind fog, go dark, then return. He tastes blood from where he has bitten his tongue.

"Honey! He's an old man. You could kill him!"

"He tried to steal from us. He doesn't care, he would have killed us if he had the chance!"

"But look, this thing, it's only a sheet of aluminum, it's only cut to look like a knife. He wouldn't have hurt us."

"I ... I ..." Tokira struggles with the word, a word he has not spoken for years. "I never take more, more than I need. Never."

"Christ."

The man pokes through Tokira's things with his foot, two old color photographs, curling at the edges, four smooth stones, a crumb of bread, an old respirator, two small spools of wire, and a worn, crumbling velvet pouch.

"What's this?"

"Don't, honey, it's his."

"Ceil! Two minutes ago he was trying to steal from us ... Hello!"

The man pulls out the gleaming, smooth frame of silver, his fingers roughly moving across the worn beads.

"Where did you get this? Who did you steal this from, old man?"

"It's, it's mine. I did not steal it."

Tokira notices how clumsy the abacus looks in his hands, how inappropriate.

"Yours, yeah, I can believe that. And I have a starship that I can take on pleasure cruises anytime I want! Now where the hell did you get this?"

"Come on, just let him go!"

"But Ceilia, this is a navigation abacus, from one of the local starships. Look at this marking stamped in the base. I need to know where he got it."

"I, I used to navigate." The fog in Tokira's mind clears for a moment, and he sees himself, young and tall, standing in the bubble window of the navigation deck of the mining freighter *Neetal Gamma*, calling out coordinates for the short trip home.

"What?"

"I, many years ago, before the Change, I used to navigate. Mining ships. I do not remember much."

"I don't believe it."

"Let me show you, let me try ..." Tokira holds out his rough, mutilated hand. It is shaking.

The young man hesitates, then places the silver abacus in Tokira's grasp, still waving the shock wand in his face.

Tokira holds the abacus gently, caressing it, feeling its value, its history. The silver frame feels cool to his touch. He closes his eyes for a moment, breathing slowly, trying to push back the fog, trying to make the past clear. The beads seem awkward. He cannot remember where to begin. Then his fingers, in a small dance of their own, begin to move across the beads, carrying his mind with them. Three slides left, nine right, then shift, four down, slowly, two down, then shift.

Tokira feels the pulse, feels the energy as his mind remembers the formulas, the patterns. All is silent as they stare at the abacus, watching only his fingers. Then the fingers stop.

"On the seventh day of the fifth season, the orbit must be reached by a seventeen degree divergence from the constellation Clarion." Tokira's voice resounds like a man in a trance. Even he is startled by the confident tone, the clarity of the calculations. Tokira looks at his hands: thin, wrinkled, the fingers poised. They do not feel like his own.

The young man, rubbing his reddish beard, squats by Tokira, searching his eyes. He motions with his thumb.

"You see those over there? Those are plans, plans of the solar electrical system of the whole city ... I work for LaBon, general of the solar panels ... I've been trying to find the source of some leaks. The capacity isn't what it should be, even with the disrepair of the panels ..."

Tokira looks on blankly, hearing words, familiar words, but feeling instead through his distant fingers, through the calculations that are resurfacing in his troubled mind.

"... and I think I've found it, the power leak, cables buried underground, far underground, across the river. I think that there is still power to some parts of the old spaceport."

"You see," the woman steps forward, her baby fingering her collarbone. She seems so young, so

familiar, like a fragment of Tokira's past. "We want to get out, to leave Bara-neetal. If there's power —"

"If there's power ..." the man interrupts, but Tokira's attention is held by the drowsing baby, and the memories it stirs. So much, so much in such a short time.

"... we can possibly get one of the shuttles out. We can leave this dying world. I don't want my son to grow up here. I'd rather we died trying."

"No place for a child at all." Tokira reaches out, caresses the tiny spine. It is warm and soft, the skin so smooth and clear.

"But I don't know the spaceport, and the plans have been destroyed. I've been collecting things, books, records ... if I can only get to one of those shuttles in the lower hangars, if only there is power. If you were a navigator, if you flew, maybe you could remember. Maybe you could help."

"Maybe this was meant to happen, maybe we were meant to meet." The woman reaches for the man's young hand, takes it.

"I, I remember so little. My mind, my memories slip from me like running water. I don't know." Tokira feels the pain again in his stomach, the sour taste. His gaze shifts uncontrollably to the open chest of food.

"Here, here, have all you want. I'm sure you must

be very hungry."

"If only I could have a little, only a small portion." Tokira grips the foil packet, tears it with his old, sore teeth. It is dry, but expands in his mouth, exploding in rich flavor. He chews slowly, forcing the calming waves to push the animal of hunger back. He nods to the woman. Such rich, brown eyes, like those of someone who lives like a phantom in his memory.

"These pictures? Are they your family? Mother, sister?" The woman holds the curled photographs in front of Tokira like an offering. He glances at the faces, young faces from his past. Cracks of bleeding color obscure details like a web, obscure the eyes, the lips, the tiny hand of a baby. They are the faces of strangers.

"I don't remember. I can't."

The man tosses the wand from his hand, pulls the plans close. "So will you help us, will you try?"

"I don't know if I can ..."

"But the way your fingers flew across the abacus ... surely the memory must be in there."

"It comes and goes, but never stays, never focuses. Not since the sickness ... I will try, if you would like, but the navigation, the freighters seem so long ago ... I remember a panic, everyone rushing, too many on the suspension bridge, the cables tearing away. Screams. I think I stayed behind, but I am

## A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

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not sure. I remember the screams. One freighter launched from the port, but it fell out of the sky like a stone, over the horizon. It seems so far away, not like a memory of my own."

"It's not the freighters we want. These logs —" The man lifts a tied bundle of yellow paper. "These tell of a lower hangar, security shuttles. No cargo, only passengers, and they're fully automated. I think they're the ships that still have the power."

The couple exchange young hopeful glances and Tokira wonders if he will be able to help, if the shroud will lift long enough, if he will find the memories. The woman leans forward, her sweet breath mingling with the scent of the baby which she places in Tokira's trembling arms. The baby squirms, twists, but does not wake, does not cry. Tokira kisses the tiny forehead.

"Our baby can't grow up here. It is poison."

"I know," says Tokira as he gently hands the baby back to the woman, aware deep inside that this was an action he performed many times in the past.

"We were planning to leave at dawn, planning to scale the cliff, but ... look, this is where the plans are destroyed. Here is where we need your help." The young man points to a torn and faded corner, blue lines disappearing at the tear. The plans are old and yellow.

"I seem to remember ..."

"Yes?"

"I seem to remember a shaft, elevator, a lift from the riverbed. I used to go there often. I used to sit by the stream and watch, just watch."

The family stands over him, casting a shadow from the electric lantern, cooling his old and tired body. He lifts his head and feels that he is looking into a world of ghosts, a world struggling to become real once again.

Dawn rises like a hot cancer. The harsh yellow sun burns like a torch in the orange sky, blistering with its heat and sharp angry shadows, pouring its harmful rays over the fearful shanties. Tokira, his cloak wrapped tight as if it will stop the radiation, weaves through the disarrayed huts, some aluminum, some fiber, some made of unnameable bones, blanched in the searing heat. His face is covered by a black rubber filter, the old valves ticking with each breath.

The family travels behind, the mother holding the child tight, wrapped in a woven titanium blanket, then rags to hide the treasure. The young man is hunched low, waddling like a cripple, the hump on his back containing all of their possessions, hidden by a cloak. No one notices as they pass.

Beyond the shanties, beyond the broken and twisted frames of buildings, across the cracked hexagons that once were fields they stumble, no one speaking. The child is silent. Tokira feels the cracks

under his bundled feet, and he counts them with each step, the number growing, accumulating. Each step counting a past that is further and further removed. Tokira stops, looks back over the expanse of arid soil. This was once rich with grain, he thinks. Once soft soil turned and reborn each season. Now the lines of age recede, converge to a blurry but finite point on the horizon. Tokira turns away, rubbing the pain from his tired thighs.

Finally, they approach the cliff. Two thousand meters below curves the dried riverbed, and across the ravine, on a similar plateau, are the giant dunes that were once the spaceport. Tokira moves along the edge, testing his balance, arms outstretched. After several moments, he finds it, a carved and worn staircase cut into the cliff, the steps crumbling, unsafe.

The young man pulls cleats from his bag, ties them to his wife's feet, then his own. Tokira does not take those offered to him; he prefers to feel the loose earth under his own feet, he prefers to test oblivion without any aid. He also refuses the rope that they tie tightly around their waists.

They begin down the stairs, their steps cautious, the shadows of the cliff covering them in a blanket of cool, still air. Tokira follows, listening to the cooing of the mother, distorted by the mask she wears, the sounds of the oblivious child, the reassuring, low utterances of the man. He holds the image in his mind, a series of perfect brush strokes representing courage, action, responsibility, family. The man, the woman, and the child, silhouetted against the backdrop of a sterile world, perched on a tiny ledge over the dry river thousands of meters below. Tokira knows that this picture is clearer, more affirming than any oblivion might offer up.

Tokira glances over his shoulder as they descend. He believes he sees shadows twitch on the cliff, on the stone stairs, but he turns away, silent. He must keep these spirits for himself.

The sun has disappeared over the cliff by the time they reach the riverbed. All is colored gray in the late afternoon twilight, and the coolness is as welcome as sleep.

Tokira reaches down, runs his fingers through the powdery dust that once was the river. Bringing a pinch of the dust to his eyes, he sees it is sterile, holding no remembrance of the gentle river that flowed through the valley, flowed for millions of years before they had come. Now, it is nothing but a memory in the faulty mind of an old man.

"You never walked beside the ripples ..."

"What?"

Tokira pulls the mask from his face, letting it fall from his fingers.

"You never knew this dust to be anything more than dust. You never knew the river."

"No, but I'm sure my parents did, and Ceil's too.

They must have known what it was like to see water. I can only guess." His voice is mechanical, the twin foil filters blurring the sound, distorting his face.

"A guess can never capture the feeling." Tokira settles down on a large, smooth cobble, rubbing his calves. "I am hungry."

The man pulls off his mask, and then his wife's, placing them carefully into his pack. "Well, I suppose we should eat something before we look for this shaft of yours. We have no idea how large the underground structures are. Ceilia, can I have that flask?"

The man takes a long, careless sip, letting the water run over his bearded chin. Tokira takes it gently, fills his mouth slowly, letting the water soak into his tongue. He swallows half, then spits the rest out to the riverbed. It disappears instantly into the dust.

"So, where do you think this shaft is?"

"I'm not sure. I will try to remember." Tokira closes his eyes, his hand reaching unconsciously for his pack, feeling the cool metal of the abacus inside, pushing away the fog. Slowly it appears to him, unwrapped from a veil: the river, the small whirlpools behind the rocks, leaves spinning, getting sucked down. He would sit, his back against the far cliff, and watch the ripples and think of ... of a family? He cannot be sure, it is all so weak, so distant. Hands rub the silver beads, feel their weight. It was near a bend, a large anvil rock jutting out, casting shadows over the cool water. That was where he would sit, while he waited for the ship to fuel, for the gigantic lithium batteries to suck their energy from the sun.

Tokira opens his eyes. Down the riverbed is a large rock, made thin and striated by the blowing sand and wind, but still holding the shape of an anvil.

"There." He points a slender, gray finger. "There is the rock. The entrance must be very near."

Tokira leads the family down the river bank, under the shadow of the cliff, past the large, overhanging rock. He feels like a ghost, sure that the memories are here but knowing that the world has changed, that it is dying. The base of the cliff walls in fine silt, and Tokira steps into the golden dust, which rises in a cloud around him. Feeling with his hands, he searches for the cliff, searches for a sign. Smooth rock, rough rock, smooth, smooth steel. The door. Tokira brushes the silt away, exposing the slate gray corner of a bulkhead.

"He found it. Honey, it's the door!"

"I remember this, from long ago. You must clear the dust away, I am too weak."

Tokira stumbles back, collapsing against the anvil stone. Purple flashes of dizziness cloud his mind, fight to blot out the memories.

"Are you all right? What can I do?"

The Silver Abacus

Tokira sees the woman's face through the blur, motions her away with his hand.

"It will pass. It will pass."

Tokira rubs his sunken eyes, watching dreamily as the young man digs with a small shovel, exposing more and more of the bulkhead. The gray steel door is scratched and pitted. It reminds Tokira of a tomb that holds dangerous memories of the past. Turning away, he lets his eyes follow the jagged contour of the distant stairs, zig-zagging up the rocky cliff. He is sure he sees shadows now, nearly halfway down, moving slowly, coming closer. It is nearly night, and he turns away, silent.

"If I can just get this to move ..." The young man's muscles bulge as he twists, leans, pulls the oblong cam. It creaks, then gives way, throwing him to the ground. He pulls on the door, and, hissing, it opens slowly.

Tokira clutches his face. The smell is a warning of a past frozen, of a past too dangerous for his weak, unclear mind.

"Jesus, get back. What the? Oh, god ..."

"Honey, what is it?"

The baby is crying.

"Some poor guy, must have been locked in there, not enough air for him to decompose ... Jesus."

The man disappears into the darkness, covering his face with a dusty forearm, then appears, pulling the swollen and wrinkled body of a man out by the collar of his uniform. The face is sunken, but moist, the open eyes milky and dead, the fingers rotting, ripe. The man tosses the body into the dry riverbed.

"Let's hope he's the only one. Come on, let's go!"

The woman looks over her shoulder, cradles the baby close, and disappears into the darkness. Tokira pauses by the corpse for a moment, the uniform on the dead man distantly familiar, the face seeming like a ghost he has seen before, in dreams. A ghost growing fainter as he caresses the cold beads of his silver abacus. He knows without turning that the shadows still approach down the carved stairs of the distant cliff. Tokira enters the darkness.

"Up here. The elevator doesn't have any power. These are the only stairs."

Tokira climbs slowly, listening to the cleated steps above resound through the steel and mortar. These stairs are familiar, Tokira tells himself, as he steps just behind the circle of the man's battery lantern. The darkness is familiar, these steps are familiar. His fingers reach for the abacus, counting each step with a bead.

"Three hundred and sixty-three steps to the main hangar platform."

"What? Did you say something?"

Tokira's statement surprises himself as well; it feels like a remnant from some other time, thrown into his mind like a shard. Still, he knows it is right.

"I said I believe there are three hundred and

sixty-three steps until the main platform. I am standing on one-thirty-seven. We are over a third there."

The baby struggles in the woman's arms, crying quietly. He takes each step one at a time, counting it, searching for other memories, other figures from his past.

They all reach a landing of buffed concrete, the stairs continuing up the shaft, melting into black. The steel bulkhead is ajar, and the man shines his light into the darkness. Tokira hears scraping below, the approach of shadows. He finds it strange that the man does not notice, though the baby squirms in anticipation.

Pushing the door open, they step into the dark, huge space of the main freighter hangar. The walls have collapsed under the weight of the sand, which blows in gentle gusts across the buried hulls of the space freighters. Tokira looks out at the night sky, visible through the slender crack above the dunes, and sees stars that he once knew. Only now they seem like random slivers of light, all except for the seven stars of the constellation Clarion, which glimmers weakly like memory wishing to be forgotten. Tokira wonders if one of the ships buried under the sand is the *Neetal Gamma*.

"So, where to now? How do we get to the lower level?"

Tokira finds it odd that the answer is clear to him. "There. The restricted access shaft ..."

Against the near wall is a small door, pitted from the years of blowing sand. Tokira steps close, letting his fingers touch the pebbly surface. A small panel is hanging from an eroded hinge, three tumblers visible in the lantern-light.

"So the combination ... do you remember it?" Tokira notices the urgency in the man's voice, a faltering in the confident tone. Tokira knows that he had access to this door in the past, that the combination was only another figure in the calculations of his life, but he never used it, never ventured down to the emergency shuttles. There had never been the need.

"Well?"

Tokira reaches out, touching the cool metal of the tumblers, spinning them under his thumb. The first number comes easily, automatically, and he turns the tumbler to seven. The second hides behind a veil of fog that is so thin he can almost see it. He twists through each number, saying each in a quiet whisper. "One. Two. Three. Four." He stops, the fog clearing his perceptions for a moment. Four is the correct number.

The sounds of steps are clear on the stairs, feet running over the steel and fiberglass. The man darts his head to the darkened entrance, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Come on! Come on! The last number, hurry!"

Tokira spins the third tumbler rapidly, his mind a blank. He looks back over the man's shoulder, at the buried freighters, at a part of his past turned under the sand of a changing world. It is a part of his past that once flew with the stars which is now grounded under the weak skies of Bara-neetal. His index finger feels the final click of the tumbler. Without looking at the number, he pulls down the handle and the small bulkhead snaps open.

The man lunges out, pushing him away, yanking the stiff door open, pushing Ceilia and Tokira through into the darkness and slamming it shut behind them. In the darkness, Tokira feels the cold.

Tokira counts eighty-three steps as he stumbles down, as fast as he dares. The steel floor of the shuttle hangar is smooth and unblemished, and feels strange under his feet. The man holds the lantern high, searching for something.

From the small sphere of light that illuminates the area, Tokira counts three shuttles, one crushed under a collapsed section of steel-work.

The man runs to a large box against the curving wall, serpentine cables of all colors fanning out, crawling over the dome like a web. He unrolls plans and opens a small hatch on the corrugated box. His shadow looms like a giant across Tokira and the woman. Consulting the plans, he moves his hands over several switches. Small lights erupt on the domed ceiling.

"Yes, yes! The power is on, the plans were right! Now the hangar-port, if it will only open ..."

Several frustrated grunts as the man hammers switches carelessly with his fist, and a flash of light explodes from the ceiling, followed by the sound of a hundred gears grinding and churning. The entire ceiling splits like a wound, dust and silt raining down, the weak stars visible through the expanding crack. The gears grind as the silt clogs them, and the opening widens, then stops, leaving a giant rift in the domed ceiling.

"Shit! It's jammed. But it's got to work, there's got to be enough space. The levels here indicate that number three is nearly fully charged."

The young man sprints, plans crumpled in his hands, to the center shuttle, sleek and silver with its burnished hull. He drops the lantern as he twists a small knob inset in the metallic panel. The door opens with a hiss and he disappears inside, leaving Tokira and the woman in view of the stars.

Tokira hears hammering coming from the access door, the contorted groans of bending steel muffled with distant shouts. He reaches out and caresses the baby. The woman looks so much older in the lantern light. Tokira feels the warmth of the baby through the age of his fingers. He brushes the woman's face, tracing the deep shadow lines that cross her cheek.

Sounds are clear, filling the air, footsteps running down the steel steps, yelling. The woman glances

over at the shuttle. Steam escapes from dormant pores in the hull. The man's muffled voice calls, "Come on, let's go. Now!"

The woman looks at the stairway, her body tense. "Look, we've got to go. Come on, I'll help you into the shuttle. We've got more than enough food, and ..."

Tokira feels the pull come from inside, like the stream pulling the leaves into the whirlpool during those quiet moments long ago. He sees her face melt with his past, the warm touch of the baby beginning to bring the memories of a lost world into focus, starting to blow away the chilling fog that has clouded him so long. Those moments shine now like jewels, blotting out the memory of sleek hulls and ozone scents and distant asteroids. Pulling his hand away from the baby, he speaks quietly. "I think I will stay."

"But you can't! My husband, he stole ... he took those plans! That's why we had to leave so soon. Those men, they're the general's men. They'll kill us!" Her eyes flicker like a rabbit's.

"Now! We have to leave now!"

"I will stay."

Tokira looks deep into the woman's face, her brown eyes, her small child. He hurts at the thought of them leaving, of saying good-bye. Memories. Memories of his past echoing in her face, becoming real, tangible for an instant. Sharp pain stings his gut, but it is not hunger.

The shouting is louder, the footsteps sound like many men. Tokira reaches into his pack, pulls out

the blue velveteen pouch heavy with the silver abacus, and hands it to the woman. Her fingers grip it tentatively.

"I can't ..."

"Take it. Now. Remember, the constellation Clarion, seventeen degrees to the left. Seven small stars in a cluster. Now go."

"But ..."

"Go."

The woman turns, holding the baby's head in one hand, the silver abacus in the other, and the pouch falls away, blowing like a cloud across the polished steel floor. She pauses for a moment in the shuttle hatch, looks at the old man. Tokira sees the cabin lights shimmer in the silver abacus, and for a moment it is brighter, more silver than any star in the sky. The hatch closes.

The shuttle creaks and hisses as the ion engines fire, twisting the air into sickly-sweet ozone. Tokira watches, pulling the two photographs from his pouch. In the blowing wind of the rising shuttle he looks at the face of a stranger who has just become more than a clouded memory. Through the cracks and the discoloration, he can clearly see a young woman with almond eyes cradling a tiny, helpless child.

"Her name was Sun Li." His voice is lost to the world, but clear to his mind, clear in the lifting fog as the shuttle climbs out the rift in the dome, clear as the shadow figures shout and run towards him.

He holds the line like a poem, perfect in all of its silent meaning: "Her name was Sun Li." □

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# The Secret Identity Diet

By Richard K. Lyon

Art by Larry Blamire

## CHAPTER 1

Greater courage is required to master oneself than to conquer an army. Therefore he or she who goes jogging at night as part of a weight-loss program need not fear muggers." — Dr. K. K. Chang, *The Use of Zen Philosophy in Weight Loss*

It was, I now realize, a terrible mistake to buy a kevlar jogging suit. Unfortunately, Dr. Chang, my cardiologist, gave me little choice. Either, he told me, you lose weight, or plan on a very early grave. Furthermore, as far as he was concerned, my past failures at dieting merely proved his theory: one could not simply eat less, one had to replace eating with exercise, lots of exercise.

The only way I could fit that much exercise into my schedule would be to go jogging in Central Park at night.

When I explained that to Dr. Chang, he solemnly told me, "It is better to be beaten by real enemies than by a ghost." Dr. Chang has more bits of fortune-cookie Zen than a Charlie Chan movie. The ghost he was referring to was my maternal grandmother. My parents died while I was quite young and I was alternately raised by my grandmothers. When my maternal grandmother's Alzheimer's reached the point that she could no longer stay alone, she wanted me to quit my job and care for her, and never mind what we'd do for money. When I had to put her in a nursing home she was absolutely furious and told me that she was praying that God would punish me, preferably by making me lose my job.

My paternal grandmother told me not to worry about it. God doesn't listen to prayers for harm, besides which, God only listens to Reborn Christians, which my maternal grandmother isn't. (Obviously I can expect to have some trouble with her too. As Dr. Chang put it, "Life is symmetrical.")

Finding a kevlar jogging suit in my size wasn't easy, and I hated the only one I could find. It was black with lightning-stroke reflectors on the chest and back. To make the resemblance to a comic-book superhero complete, there was a loose-fitting hood. The manufacturer's recommendation was that for double protection I should wear a football helmet under the hood.

There is nothing more pathetically absurd than a fat man dressed up in a superhero costume, except, of course, a fat, bald man who's pushing middle age. The first time I looked at myself in the mirror I cried. Was saving my life worth the humiliation of wearing such an outfit in public?

Maybe not, but my job was also on the line. I work in the Commerce Department, Bureau of Export Con-

trol. Technically, that makes me a Federal Agent. No gun, but I do have a badge. While Export Control is not nearly as image-conscious as the FBI or Secret Service, there are still limits. At my last performance review, my boss commended me for doing my work singularly well and for putting in lots of unpaid overtime. He also told me that that wasn't good enough. Nobody likes a fat cop. Lose weight or else.

In the late fall I started jogging. I'd walk to the park carrying my old high school football helmet and wearing a topcoat over my jogging suit. These days the park is virtually deserted after dark. I'd take off the coat, put on the helmet, and run.

The topcoat was a bit of a problem. I couldn't leave it anywhere and expect to find it still there when I got back, and wearing it while jogging would be too hot. That left me with one choice: tie my coat to the back of my jogging suit and wear it like a cape.

Dr. Chang assured me that dressing like an idiotic comic-book hero was good psychology. It would make me angry, and that anger made me run faster and longer.

That was, I found, quite true. Whenever I felt tired or winded I'd think of my name, Charles Kent, and all the jokes people had made about it — "Hey, Superman, why don't you step into that phone booth and take off all that flab?" — and I'd keep on running.

By early spring I was down to three hundred twenty pounds. While I still looked — and was — terribly fat, Dr. Chang was really pleased. For every pound of fat I'd lost he estimated I'd converted two pounds into muscle. I also felt better about myself. I even found the nerve to ask Marge Rhoads for a date. Of course she turned me down, but that's not the point. The important thing is that I'd gained enough self-esteem to ask.

In addition to all these good things, my boss noticed the weight loss and assured me that if I kept it up I wouldn't have to worry about my job.

On February 26th, however, it all started falling apart. The park that night was darker than usual, no lights except the distant buildings, and the sky was black and threatening. Over in Jersey they were having the mother and father of all lightning storms, and it would probably reach the city before I got back to my apartment.

I was running through the darkness when I heard a crash and a woman's scream. Thinking she'd had an accident, I turned in her direction.

A moment later I knew I was wrong. The woman kept on screaming, and there was the sound of heavy blows. She was being beaten!



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What I'd have done if I'd been thinking clearly, I've no idea. At the time it happened, my mind was full of anger at past wrongs and heroic self-images. I lumbered up a small hill, and there beneath me was what I'd expected and feared. A gang of six young thugs had pulled a young woman off her bicycle and were beating her with pipes and chains.

I was halfway down the hill and gathering speed rapidly when they saw me. Shouting, they dropped their pipes and chains and drew guns.

I leapt.

For one terrible instant they were shooting at me and I was flying through the air. I'd thrown myself at them lengthwise. That's a crossblock, a move that's totally illegal in football, and it worked! Fully dressed in kevlar I'm three hundred eighty pounds, and the four punks I hit probably didn't weigh that much between them. They went down with me on top, and I knew none of them would be getting up soon.

The other two were emptying their pistols at me. The .22 slugs hurt like wasp stings and the .38s were worse. The one with the .38 was close enough for me to kick, and I did.

He went flying. I'm so used to thinking of myself as fat and helpless that I forget how strong my legs are. For a horrible moment I thought I'd killed him.

With the last punk plunking at me with .22s, I couldn't worry about that. As I sat up, his gun clicked on an empty cylinder. Dropping it, he snatched another weapon from his belt.

Maybe it was a zip gun, but it looked more like a cannon. "I don't care if you're bloody Superman!" he swore, "you won't have any sodding immunity to this!"

He'd leveled that monstrous weapon at my stomach. There was no way he could miss. Nothing I could do to avoid the bullet... if he fired.

He was hesitating. In the darkness he could see nothing of me save that I was a huge black figure. Lightning was flashing in the west, reflecting in the lightning stroke emblem on my chest. In fear he'd called me Superman.

Would that fear paralyze him long enough? Rising to my feet, I took a step toward him. Two more paces and I could snatch that cannon from him. His eyes were wide, and he was probably as scared as I was. With all the appearance of confidence I could manage I took another stride toward him. One more step and —

He fired.

The pain was incredible. I knew I was going to die. I'd been shot in the stomach with a cannon, and no one recovers from wounds like that.

In the next lightning stroke I saw my murderer's face, sharp, pinched-in features and the fast dark eyes of a ferret.

The girl bicyclist was lying at his feet, moaning. Dear Lord, it was Marge!

My murderer was doing something with his cannon, his hands working with jerky squirrel-like speed. Pulling a bag from one of his pockets, he was taking things out of it and stuffing them down the muzzle of his gun. It was a muzzle loader, and he was going to shoot again. Having killed me, he knew he couldn't leave any witnesses.

He was going to kill Marge!

Why I was still standing after being mortally wounded, I'd no idea, but I was, and maybe I could save Marge with my last gasp. Taking a staggering step, I reached a trembling hand toward my assailant.

His ferret eyes widening with fear, he exclaimed, "Bloody 'Eill! 'Ou hain't even bleedin'!"

Somehow I snatched the bag from him. With a scream he whirled around and fled into the night.

I stood there, looking after him, suddenly feeling a little foolish. The pain in my stomach was easing slightly, and he'd been right: I wasn't bleeding. His cannon hadn't had quite enough punch to penetrate my kevlar.

Behind me a childish voice was shouting, "There he is, Officer! Superman! He just beat up those bad guys!"

"Just who the Hell are you, Mister, and what the Hell have you been doing?" one of New York's Finest shouted at me. As I turned toward him a lightning flash made me briefly visible.

The next moment the heavens opened. Suddenly wet and feeling utterly ridiculous, I quickly got into my coat. Nothing could be more embarrassing than having to talk to a cop while dressed like a comic-book character. My football helmet was cracked, almost split in two. Tossing it in a trash can, I walked toward the cop.

He wasn't paying me any attention. The rain had caught him as unprepared as it had me, and, in addition to the little girl, he had a crowd of adults with him. While they shouted a confusing babel of things at him, he was yelling, "This is a crime scene. Everybody stay behind me!"

It wasn't working; the people were starting to push past him despite his cursing and his furious brandishing of his nightstick. His face resembled that of a bulldog who had had all he could take. When his angry gaze fell on me, he shouted, "Hey, Lardass, get back here or I'll throw your fat butt in jail!"

"Officer," I replied mildly, "you're mistaken. I —"

"LOOK!" the little girl shouted, pointing into the sky, "Superman's flying away!" What I saw in the lightning flash that illuminated the sky was only a hawk. They come over from Jersey sometimes to hunt pigeons. Beside me the cop was gasping, his mouth wide. After a moment he murmured, "Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, it's finally happened!"

Everyone else was staring in awe at the sky while Marge Rhoads lay bleeding and moaning scant feet away. "Damn it, Officer!" I yelled, gesturing at Marge, "Crime scene or not, that woman needs first aid!"

"Who the Hell are you, Fatso," he snapped, "to tell me my job?"

Pulling out my badge, I replied "Federal Agent Charles Kent, and if you want to keep your badge, you'll let me keep the crowd here while you give first aid."

## CHAPTER 2

The crowd of curious onlookers grew rapidly, and I had an awkward few moments before more police arrived. Fortunately the first Emergency Medical Services unit arrived promptly. Marge was being rushed to Columbia Presbyterian before the Eyewitness News truck arrived. They did, however, get some footage of the five punks I'd flattened, being arrested



and taken away. All of them also needed hospitalization.

No one, however, was paying the slightest attention to me. There was nothing left for me to do here, and my stomach felt as though it needed an ice pack.

In fact ... I was in no shape to walk back to my apartment. I needed a cab. While I didn't have any trouble finding a pay phone, the stupid thing insisted on spitting out my phone card. In fact it wouldn't take any of my credit cards! While Manhattan still has a few of the old phones you can put money into, this wasn't one of them. While I could probably find another phone, if the trouble was with my cards —

"Hey, buddy! If you're phoning for a cab, I'm free!"

Turning, I saw that a cabbie was yelling at me through his cab's open window.

"Thanks!" I yelled back.

When I got back to my small apartment, I took off my coat and found that I'd stuffed the mugger's bag into one of my pockets.

That was something I could worry about later. Right now my stomach hurt.

It hurt a lot.

When I undressed I found my body was covered with angry red welts and my stomach ...

Oh, dear Lord, it was worse than ninth grade when Jack Grensdale hit me full force with a baseball bat. The doctor had said that if I hadn't had so much fat to absorb the blow I'd have died.

Oh God, if I, Oh God ...

I remember getting a TV dinner from the refrigerator before the fear reaction set in. I started crying and I couldn't stop. Dimly I knew that this was normal: you act with more courage than you have, and you pay for it later. Knowing that didn't help. I couldn't move, couldn't do anything except sit there clutching a frozen dinner to my stomach and cry.

As per its programming, my TV turned itself on at 11. With her usual bright smile Kathy Murphy asked, "Has New York become Metropolis? Do we now literally have Superman flying around above our streets? There was an incident in Central Park that has serious people asking that kind of question. Here live from Central Park is Eyewitness News Correspondent John Sanford with the story."

Kathy's pretty face dissolved to be replaced by the weatherbeaten but handsome countenance of John Sanford. "Kathy," he said, "I'm here with Mr. and Mrs. West and their ten-year-old daughter Sally. Sally was the chief witness to tonight's extraordinary events, but, Mrs. West, would you set the stage for us?"

As Sanford turned, extending his microphone, the camera panned, showing a blonde, plump woman, who was obviously happy to be on TV, and her husband, who seemed to be trying to sink into the ground. "Well," she began cheerfully, "the Garricks, the Allans, and we were having our Wednesday night run through the park — safety in numbers you know — when we heard a woman screaming. Sally's just too fast for the rest of us. In just a moment she was way ahead of the rest of us and no use shouting at her to wait."

"Thank you, Mrs. West," Sanford said smoothly as he bent to share the microphone with a very slender girl. "Now, Sally," he continued, "would you tell us

what you saw?"

"It was Lightningman!" she declared eagerly, her blue eyes wide with excitement. "He's like Superman but he can only fly at night when it's thundering. This poor woman was down on the ground and these six bad guys were beating her with pipes when Lightningman spotted them. He swooped down on them like a hawk! When they saw him coming at them out of the sky they pulled their guns and started shooting. But of course the bullets just bounced off."

"He hit four of them like a freight train! The fifth kept on shooting and Lightningman hit him. One blow! With his fist! The man flew twenty feet! The last man had this big supergun, kinda like a phaser, but it didn't do anything to Lightningman. He just took it away from him and the man ran away! That's when I ran back a few steps. I saw the policeman and everybody coming and I yelled at them to hurry and we all got to the top of the hill in time to see Lightningman fly away!"

"Well, Sally," Sanford commented mildly, "that's quite a story. Did you —"

"There are," Mrs. West interrupted firmly, "at least a dozen witnesses who confirm the last part of my daughter's story. We all saw a huge man dressed in black with a streaming cape and a lightning stroke insignia on his chest, and every single one of us saw him fly away."

"And that, Kathy," Sanford said, turning to look full face at the camera, "is the story from here."

The scene shifted to the TV studio long enough for Ms. Murphy to smile and say, "Thank you, John, and now for further developments in this story we go to Sara Vial at Police Headquarters, Manhattan South."

Another scene shift, and a young black woman was saying, "I'm here, Kathy, with Police Captain Ian Foster. Tell us, Captain Foster, was Mrs. West correct? Are there a number of witnesses who confirm her daughter's story?"

"Yes," Foster, a man whose leathery face showed many hard years, replied, "if anything, she understated the situation. Police Officer Dent and all the people who were with him agree that they saw a mysterious man in black who flew away. Furthermore, we have in custody five of the men who assaulted the female bicyclist. In their confessions they admit that when they first saw this, ahh ..."

"Lightningman," Sara supplied.

"This unidentified individual," Captain Foster continued sourly, "he was indeed flying. They also admit to shooting him repeatedly without the slightest effect." Foster picked up several small objects from a glass dish and held them up to the camera. I saw that they were distorted pieces of lead. I knew they were bullets, but that seemed far away.

"When we searched the crime scene," Captain Foster continued, "we found a great many spent slugs which had definitely bounced off something. There's also some interesting medical evidence. One of the perpetrators suffered three broken ribs, which the doctor who treated him believes to be the result of a single blow of great force. The other four suffered a complex series of multiple injuries, the kind of injuries you'd expect if they'd been playing catch and someone

threw them a telephone pole."

"Then," Sara Vial asked expectantly, "the NYPD is taking this incident seriously? You're not dismissing it as a hoax?"

"Oh, yes," Foster answered gravely, "we have to take it extremely seriously. In fact there's more to it than I've said so far."

He picked up another object from the glass dish and handed it to her. Surprised by the item's weight, she nearly dropped it. Holding it up for the camera, she asked, "What is this?"

"It's a large pistol ball, a three-quarter-inch sphere of lead," he replied. "We found it and several others just like it at the crime scene."

"But," she protested "what kind of gun would shoot something like this?"

"The witness Sally West mentioned that the sixth perpetrator, the one who escaped, had something she called a 'supergun.' We believe it was a medieval horse pistol. That's the only firearm ever made that could fire bullets like this."

"But what," she demanded "would anybody be doing with such a weapon in Twenty-first-Century New York?"

"We've had," Captain Foster replied grimly, "two previous crimes in which it was used, two burglaries in which police officers were shot. In each case the officer's kevlar vest stopped the bullet, but that didn't do either man much good. The impact with which something this heavy strikes is horrendous. The officers suffered crushed ribs and severe internal injuries and—" Foster's face became very hard and cold, "the doctors were powerless to save either man."

From the glass dish Foster picked up and displayed a badly flattened lead sphere. "This unidentified man in black ... this Lightningman, if you want, he took a hit from that cop-killer supergun at point-blank range and it didn't even slow him down."

Somewhere in the back of my mind a little voice was screaming angrily that Captain Foster was an idiot, that I'd been hurt plenty and anyone with any sensitivity would know that. Mostly, though, I didn't hear that little voice. I just sat, watching the tube with sick horror while holding a frozen TV dinner to my aching stomach. The fear reaction which had held me paralyzed was beginning to fade under the unpleasant realization that I could be in real trouble. Through some quite perverse miracle I'd become a comic-book hero. Fate couldn't have devised a trick better calculated to get me fired.

No. Worse than that. This disaster would make me totally unemployable. Everybody's at least a little image-conscious. Who'd want to hire a fat fool who goes out at night dressed like a superhero?

Nobody, that's who.

My only hope was to keep my identity secret, and there was small chance of that. NYPD wouldn't rest until they found and questioned me. Neither would the news media.

I was doomed.

## CHAPTER 3

When I woke up the next morning the good news was that my wounds hurt a great deal less than

I'd expected. The bad news was that I was the subject of the Today show and all the other morning talk shows. The "experts" were divided between the Superman and Batman theories. The Superman theory was just that. Earth was one planet in a galaxy that probably had millions of planets. Just because we'd never had a visitor before was no reason we couldn't have one now.

In the Batman theory I was a man of extraordinary but not superhuman strength, bulletproof because I wore reactive ceramic armor, and flying with the help of a jet pack. Since I (Lightningman) probably had a lot of other very expensive high-tech hardware, I must be a man of great wealth.

Arnold Schwarzenegger was interviewed briefly. While he denied being Lightningman, he admitted to being very strong and very wealthy. He also conceded that the police artist's sketches did strongly resemble him and, yes, all this publicity might do his new movie some good, but he was doing this interview via satellite from Tokyo. There simply was no way he could have been in New York last night.

Listening to all this I couldn't help moaning. People were building up an incredible set of expectations. They'd be outraged when Lightningman turned out to be nothing but fat, bald me.

It got worse. The American Civil Liberties Union was going to sue Lightningman. Their spokeswoman denounced him for violating the civil rights of several people. The muggers I'd beaten up, she argued, were merely accused people, legally innocent of any crime until such time as they were convicted. Since there had been a policeman on the scene there was absolutely no grounds for making any kind of citizen's arrest.

Furthermore, the unproven claim that the alleged muggers had shot at me did not in any wise justify my use of deadly force against them. I was bulletproof and therefore not in any danger.

The ACLU spokeswoman was promptly followed by the chairman of the PBA. For the first time in decades the PBA was in complete agreement with the ACLU. Lightningman was a vigilante, and if there was one thing New York didn't need, it was more amateurs mucking around in law enforcement. While the NYPD had to tolerate the Guardian Angels, they did not need a self-appointed superhero.

The Police Commissioner agreed with him. Since my superhuman strength made my fists deadly weapons, he was ordering my immediate arrest on a charge of assault with a lethal weapon.

While the representative of the FAA wasn't entirely convinced that Lightningman was real, he was sure that it was illegal to fly around New York at low altitudes. At least for a human being. If I was from another planet and flew naturally like a bird, I might have the same right to fly as a bird. The FAA's legal staff was researching the problem.

A black activist compared Lightningman to the knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Both wore strange costumes to conceal their identities, both operated at night, both — but that was more than I could stand. After turning off the TV I ate breakfast: black coffee, instant, without sugar, half a grapefruit, and one slice of unbuttered, thin-sliced toast.

Eating that kind of breakfast was bad enough, having to look at it without TV was worse. If only — wait a minute, what was that on my desk?

Or ... rather ... what was that floating a centimeter above my desk?

Ah eye?

A disembodied eye staring at me unblinking as it drifted back and forth over my desk?

Rubbing my eyes didn't make it go away. I hadn't taken any painkillers stronger than aspirin and that damned eye was floating there — and, blast it, there was a second eye resting on the desk.

As I stared at them in hopeless fascination, I couldn't spare much time to examine them. I had to get to the office as usual, maintain my normal routine, and hope that by being totally inconspicuous I could avoid discovery. I knew that that was what I had to do and I knew that I couldn't. The puzzle of the floating eye and its resting twin was far too great. I had to solve it.

Part of the mystery, where the eyes had come from, was clear. Last night I'd tossed the bag I'd taken from the muggers on my desk. It had opened, and the eyes had spilled out.

Actually ... while there was a resemblance, calling them eyes wasn't an accurate description. Each of them was really a three-layered marble, an inner jet black sphere surrounded by a translucent blue sphere which in turn was surrounded by an outer, perfectly transparent sphere.

When I picked up the eye that wasn't floating, the floater sank to the desk top. Surprised, I let go of the sphere — and it didn't fall! Now it was the floater, and the other rested on the desk top.

In the next few minutes I learned the rules of this game: for either to float the other had to be touching the desk. Was this some kind of magnetic phenomenon? Contact with one sphere made the steel surface of my desk magnetic and that allowed the other to float? If so, it would also work on the stove top. It did, and there was my answer. This was the Meissner effect! Superconductors repel magnetic fields, which means that two superconductive magnets repel each other. The innermost part of each sphere was a room-temperature superconductive magnet, so when one magnetized a steel surface the other —

Oops! One of the spheres was floating toward the hot burner I'd just used to boil water for coffee.

Bang!

For a horribly long moment a bright afterglow filled my vision and my ears hurt. As the ringing subsided I felt my face and discovered that I wasn't bleeding. Apparently the explosion hadn't produced any shrapnel, or at least none that had hit me.

Lucky. Very lucky. I'd been about to reach for the marble. Another second and I'd have had my hand on it, and goodbye hand.

I swallowed with a very dry mouth and fought a sudden desire to run or hide in panic. Of course neither running nor hiding would do me any good, but I had very good reasons to be frightened. Why had somebody coated superconductive magnets with layers of transparent explosive? Why had they tried to kill Marge? What was going on?

Obviously something very dark and very nasty. The

kind of business in which killing me would be a minor overhead expense.

I was scared and angry and that was a mistake. I had to choose one or the other. If I chose anger, that meant I'd have to find out what was going on.

I'd no idea how to do that.

Scared, however, came with a clear program. Being scared meant I'd go to work as usual, be totally inconspicuous, and hope none of the heavies would notice me.

## CHAPTER 4

I work in the New York branch of the Bureau of Export Control, which means I and twelve other people have desks in the same large room. The branch chief, Sam Hand, has a private office that's cut out of one corner of that room. I got to work a little later than usual, which was still earlier than anyone else except Sam.

Before I could sit down at my desk, he stuck his head out of his office and looked directly at me. I had a terrible sinking feeling.

"Hey, Lightningman!" he snapped. "Come in here. NYPD wants to talk to you!"

My sinking feeling changed to a sunk feeling. My career was over. Since I was Civil Service, Sam couldn't fire me immediately, but that would only delay the inevitable.

By the time I entered his office, Sam was seated and had put his feet on his desk. I recognized the man standing by his desk immediately, Captain Ian Foster. "Well, Captain," Sam said, smiling unpleasantly, "here's your Lightningman. Do you really think they make jet belts in double extra-large?"

Though Foster looked at me with a very sour expression, he didn't say anything to me. Instead he growled at Sam, "Okay, so it was ridiculous. Fat-and-Bald here owns a kevlar suit, so I had to check him out."

Sam waved at me the way he does when he wants me to leave, and I went back to my desk. Captain Foster was right behind me. Instead of stopping to talk to me when I got to my desk, he kept on going.

When he reached the door, I half expected him to turn and gesture for me to follow. He didn't. Having never spoken to me, nor given me a second glance, he pushed through the door and was gone.

I was safe. The danger of being identified as Lightningman and having my career ruined was past. Everybody would think the way Captain Foster had. Fat men can't be superheroes, especially when they're also bald. Logically I should feel great relief at being safe.

I didn't.

Last night I'd done something heroic. Six thugs had been beating a woman and I'd taken them on. Maybe if I'd had time to think about it, I wouldn't have been so brave. That didn't make what I'd done any less heroic.

Afterwards, though, I hadn't been willing to take credit for the deed. I'd been afraid of ridicule. People wouldn't care that I'd been brave, only that I was fat and bald and had been wearing silly clothing.

Earlier this morning I'd been thinking that I had to choose between being angry and being scared. All of a

sudden that decision had become very easy. I was angry. All these years I'd taken a lot of abuse — and consoled myself by eating — but no more.

Maybe I couldn't actually be a hero, but I damned well could be a detective like Nero Wolfe. He would theorize, put all the clues in a sensible order, and that would show him where to look for more clues. For example, there was the fact that the thugs who'd assaulted Marge had used pipes and chains, teenage weapons. They'd all been relatively small men. Men who, from a distance, would easily be mistaken for teens. If I hadn't happened by, she'd have seemed the victim of another teen wilding. Teen muggers, however, rarely carry guns, nor do they have West End London accents. That meant Marge was the victim of a conspiracy, a professional hit that was supposed to look like a mugging.

I'd known Marge a long time. We'd worked together a lot. Even if she wouldn't date me, she was definitely my friend. I knew her, and I knew the conspiracy would be related to anything in her personal life. It had to be something she'd been working on.

Someone wanted to export something they shouldn't. They'd carefully prepared a fraudulent application and sent it in, expecting us to rubberstamp it. Instead, Marge, being very talented and careful, had started digging into it. That caused them a problem which they'd decided to solve by removing Marge.

Fortunately I knew Marge's logon, and tapping keys on my desktop terminal I accessed her files. While she'd been handling more than a hundred applications, most of them were untouched backlog. These I could safely eliminate. There were also many for which her investigations had disclosed nothing even slightly unusual. Eliminating all of them left five suspects.

Outside in the hallway people were buying their morning coffee and donuts, big, fresh, crisp donuts covered with powdered sugar or lovely chocolate or vanilla frosting or — DAMN IT! ALL I HAD FOR BREAKFAST WAS ONE MISERABLE PIECE OF DRY TOAST!

Mumbling curses on all the thin people in the world, I stared at the screen and forced myself to concentrate. Marge had spent some time on an application from General Electric. Every year for decades GE had applied for permission to ship a long list of parts and raw materials to their assembly plant in Hong Kong. At first glance the application deserved a rubberstamp approval ... but the list included 500 kilos of buckyballs. Buckyballs were the world's smallest ball bearings, spherical molecules containing sixty carbon atoms. If you wanted to slide one atomically smooth surface over another, buckyballs were the lubricant of choice. That made buckyballs critical to ultra-fi CD players and a dozen other civilian products that GE assembled in their Hong Kong plant.

Buckyballs were also an essential part of several advanced weapon systems, things the U. S. didn't want the People's Republic of China to get. Hong Kong was now a "semi-autonomous" region of the PRC.

Politics in the last great Communist power was often dark and violent. Had Marge been beaten as part of a plot to get high-tech weapons?

The second application that Marge had tagged for

more study was DuPont's. They wanted to sell three million pounds of tetrafluoroethylene to a small chemical company in Sicily for use in making teflon-poly-styrene block copolymers. Seemingly legitimate enough, but Marge had traced the ownership of the Sicilian company through a maze of dummy holding companies to a New York crime family. Furthermore, the Sicilian company had never bought any of the styrene they'd need. They had bought chlorine. Chlorinate tetrafluoroethylene and you're doing something the United Nations absolutely forbids, manufacturing freon. Under UN rules the only legal source of freon is the recycling ghoulies: the guys who go to auto graveyards and suck the freon out of the air conditioners. Since that's quite expensive there's a small but lucrative market for illegal freon.

Theta Chemicals, a small firm with headquarters in Boston, wanted permission to ship thirty tons of methyl phosphoric acid to their plant in Ireland for use in making insecticides. While that was perfectly plausible, methyl phosphoric acid was also one of the ingredients needed to make the nerve gas Sarin. The president and several of the officers of Theta Chemical were known sympathizers of the IRA.

The application from Texas Instruments was to export a CW 16-micron laser to a French company. On investigation it turned out that the French company did a great deal of business with the nation of Uzbekistan. After independence, Uzbekistan had become a theocracy that made Iran look like a model of reason and sanity. While Uzbekistan had been part of the Soviet Union, it had been the site of most of the USSR's ICBMs. While the Russians had managed to pull all the warheads back to Holy Mother Russia, they'd left the missiles behind.

Outside the office my coworkers were still gorging themselves on donuts and coffee and — *Oh God, the coffee cart was now selling chocolate chip cookies! The good ones that are the size of a saucer!*

A 16-micron laser is what you need to do laser photochemical separation of uranium isotopes. With 20 megawatts CW the Uzbeks could arm all their missiles in a year or two.

The last application was also from Texas Instruments, but it had been withdrawn. Initially TI had hoped to sell three hundred kilos of room-temperature superconductor to a London-based company, but TI had been underbid by a German firm. For no reason I could imagine, Marge had continued to investigate the TI application even though it was withdrawn. She'd found out that the London-based firm was actually owned by a group of Brazilian investors, but that wasn't really unusual. As a nation Brazil has such a bad credit rating that Brazilian businessmen often feel they need to hide their nationality.

## CHAPTER 5

By lunchtime (300 grams of skinless cold chicken, twenty carrot sticks, and all the black coffee I wanted) I still hadn't solved the mystery, though several pieces of what had happened were beginning to make sense.

At first glance it seemed remarkable that Marge had been processing five extremely suspicious applications

all at the same time.

Part of the explanation was simply that Marge was extremely good at her job, expert at finding reasons for being suspicious. The other half of the explanation was that Marge had been saving them. The five applications had come in over a considerable period of time. Marge, when she'd been unable to confirm or allay her suspicions, had written each applicant a letter, telling them that, unfortunately, the processing of their application would be slower than usual.

If Marge had hoped that the bad guys would betray themselves by trying to bribe her, she'd been disappointed. Her letter file showed that all five had replied with form letters.

While that didn't prove anything, it did move the Brazilians up to first place on the suspect list. The other four suspects wanted something from Marge. Bribery rather than violence was their logical next move. The Brazilians, however, already had the room-temperature superconductor they wanted. The only thing they'd want from Marge was for her to keep her nose out of their affairs. That was a situation in which you could expect violence.

Furthermore, one of the thugs in the park had been West End London. The Brazilians had used a London firm as cover for their dealings. Of course none of this proved anything, but it did lead to an interesting working hypothesis. With many large corporations downsizing, hosts of people were being forced into early retirement, including a lot of scientists. Many of them were extremely angry about it and quite willing to sell their dangerous knowledge to anyone who'd pay. Suppose one of these renegade technologists had made some kind of superweapon for the Brazilians, a weapon that would allow them to carry out some kind of dire plot. Whatever this plan might be, it was well advanced, since the Brazilians had a gang of thugs running around New York making preparations. During the course of these preparations the gang had encountered two policemen in kevlar vests and killed both with three-quarter-inch lead slugs.

While that meant that the superweapon could be used as an ordinary gun, obviously that was not its primary function. Probably the thugs had invented this alternate use when they realized they were likely to have problems with the police. What then was the weapon's primary function? Logically, the strange three-layered marbles I'd captured had to be the ammunition it fired. But what did they do?

I couldn't imagine. Probably that meant that I should attack the problem from a different point of view. The Brazilians were financiers; what unusual business transactions had they been carrying out lately?

After an hour's digging in the Securities and Exchange Commission's data base, I had the answer. The whole of the Brazilian establishment, everybody who was anybody, had been sinking all the money they could raise into something the SEC called "actual gold." Since Brazil was suffering under a crushing international debt, any such large investment was extraordinary. What was "actual gold" that they wanted to do so badly?

Since people were still out of the office for lunch I

had privacy to call my cousin Seymour, the stockbroker, and ask him. "Actual gold," he said flatly, "is a very bad investment. Never goes up more than gold, and the handling charges can eat you alive."

"But what," I demanded, "is it?"

"Ohh, ... well ... that's a little hard to explain. One of those technical things that seems to violate common sense. To begin with, you know, don't you, that nearly all the money in the United States doesn't exist?"

"Well," I began, "it's all paper not backed by—"

"No," Seymour said, "that's not what I'm talking about. Paper money exists. You can touch it. What I'm saying is that most of our money isn't tangible. Think about it: nearly all business is done by check, bank draft, or credit card. Very little business is done with printed paper money and so there isn't very much of it. Nearly all our money is numbers in computer memory banks."

"Okay," I told him, "go on."

"Well," he continued, "it's kinda the same with gold. Time was, when gold was something you kept in a deep dark hole in the ground, like Fort Knox. People kept records as to who owned how much of the gold down in these holes, but nobody ever did anything with it. Back in the 1950s people started to get smart and ask why should the level of international financial activity be set by the amount of metal that's buried where the sun doesn't shine. The central banks of the major industrial nations finally did the logical thing and created what was then called 'paper gold,' financial instruments that are the functional equivalent of metallic gold but a lot better. You can transfer them to the other side of the world in milliseconds, which you can't do with the metal. Nowadays, of course, nobody uses the term paper gold. It's just gold. When you want to talk about the metal, you say 'actual gold,' but nobody, except hyper-conservatives and the-world-is-going-to-end nuts, trades in actual gold."

"If," I asked cautiously, "nearly all trading is with paper rather than actual gold, how much actual gold is left?"

"Oh, don't worry," Seymour replied in a tone of cheerful reassurance. "There's a lot more actual left than anybody could possibly have any need for. Actual's probably ten or maybe even fifteen percent of the total gold supply. There's — Excuse me! My other line's ringing. Good talking to you, cousin."

Seymour faded, leaving me to digest what he'd told me. The Brazilians were making massive investments of a kind that only made sense if you thought the world was headed for a major disaster. They were also doing business with a renegade weapons scientist, a man who could provide the means for causing that disaster. Obviously they were plotting something remarkably grim. But what?

I had one more clue to check out. The outer layers of those strange eyeline marbles had been a transparent explosive. Why would anyone find it useful to make an explosive transparent?

After some digging through *Chemotechnology On Line* I had the answer. Transparent explosives were useful in implosion devices. In an implosion device, an object is surrounded by explosives. The explosives are detonated and they implode the object, crush it in on

itself. In such devices the advantage of a transparent explosive is that you could ignite the explosive by laser, set all of it off in the same nanosecond. That would give you a far more uniform implosion.

While that was important in nuclear weapons designs, I couldn't see what relevance it had to superconductive magnets. If you crushed a supercon magnet ... *Oh, dear God! My credit cards!* When that thug shot me with the supergun their magnetic strips had been wiped clean!

With sudden horror I knew what that meant. All the international banks shielded their computer memory banks against electromagnetic pulse weapons. This shielding was an adequate defense against conventional EMP weapons, which were relatively primitive devices, not much more than a stick of dynamite inside a solenoid. Laser-ignited transparent explosives would give a perfectly uniform implosion, and that would make the EMP much sharper. Sharpen the pulse enough, and it goes through ordinary shielding like sunlight through glass.

Destroying all the banking records in New York wouldn't do the Brazilians much good ... unless they had teams ready to do that all over the world. If they did that, then at a single stroke Brazil's overwhelming international debt would vanish because all the records would be gone. So would most of the world's gold supply. It only existed in the imagination of a computer and would disappear like fairy gold at sunrise.

What was I to do? I couldn't prove any of this. My boss was the worst man in the world to go to with anything like this. If I went over his head he'd be furious. Marge, however, was a remarkably sensible person. Besides, maybe if I took her some flowers while she was in the hospital, she'd see me in a different light.

## CHAPTER 6

Parking at Columbia Presbyterian was always a problem, just too many people chasing too few parking spaces. Fortunately, since I don't own a car, it wasn't my problem, and it was a good opportunity to follow Dr. Chang's advice. He'd told me that gloating over other people's problems, like parking, would make it easier for me to manage the fact that many other people could eat cookies and not get fat.

It worked pretty well. A couple more minutes of gloating and I'd be ready to talk to Marge.

Oops, now there was someone who wasn't playing fair, a long black limo with diplomatic plates parked in an ambulance-only zone. I —

*Oh, God! The man standing next to the limo!* Though he was now dressed to look the perfect British chauffeur, I still recognized him. He was the ferret-faced tough from London's West End who'd shot me last night!

Where were the police? There should at least be a security guard someplace nearby ... but there wasn't.

The only person in uniform was a woman leading a group of Girl Scouts. No one else in sight looked even vaguely official. Instead, there were a young couple bringing home a new baby, a group of elderly people, and a few other people, all obviously noncombatants.

*Wait!* There, coming down that hallway, two husky

male nurses pushing a woman in a wheelchair. I could flash my badge, get them to —

The woman in the wheelchair was unconscious, her face somehow distorted, and I still recognized her.

*Marge!*

In broad daylight, with no one giving them a second glance, they were kidnapping her!

Counting the chauffeur, there were three of them and one of me. They would have guns and I didn't ... but there was no way for them to know that.

Suppose I just went up to Ferretface, flashed my badge, and told him that he was under arrest. I could unbutton my coat and hold my hand as if I were ready to draw the gun I didn't have. That would give him a choice, fight or flee. Fight meant showing a weapon and giving me all the excuse I'd need to shoot him. Flight would be perfectly safe. He could just hop in the limo and drive away while I shouted at him.

If he fled, his partners in crime would be without transportation. They couldn't run very fast while pushing a wheelchair. They'd have to leave Marge behind. It could work. It could also get me killed.

Last night I'd been able to bluff Ferretface. He'd folded, and he would have won if he had just pushed the fight a little further. Maybe he would fold again.

I unbuttoned my coat and took out my badge. Holding it in my left hand I walked toward him. His attention was fixed on his companions, and he didn't see me at first.

When I thought the distance was right, I raised my left hand, badge proudly displayed, and shouted, "You by the limo, freeze! You're under arrest!"

Dropping into a fighting crouch, he pulled his gun and fired. If I'd had a gun and pulled it like Wyatt Earp I still would have lost. When he fired, I felt the impact in my stomach, but there was almost no noise, just a little puff.

I'd been shot with a silenced weapon. I was dead, mortally wounded in a horribly painful way, but why was there almost no pain?

Expecting to see my life's blood pouring out, I looked at my stomach. Instead of a bullet wound I saw a small dart. Was it tranquilizer or poison?

Ferretface was looking at me as if he expected me to drop dead. Instead I pulled his dart out of my stomach, tossed it aside, and charged at him. Raising my arms high, fingers curled, I ran, snarling as furiously as I could.

The gun in his hand clicked. Empty after one shot. His face showed alarm. He was going to run! He was running!

At me! Closing the distance between us before I could think, he swerved to my right. As he passed he kicked my foot out from under me. I fell with a horribly painful crash. For an instant he was standing above me sneering down. His foot pulled back. I saw the kick coming but couldn't get my head out of the way in time.

Things got very fuzzy. A lot of people were yelling. Somebody was running toward me. Two nurses. They were loading Marge into the limo.

I tried to get up and couldn't. "So," Ferretface sneered down at me, "you haven't had enough, Fatso." He pulled back his foot to kick me again.

"Sam, come on!" one of the nurses shouted. Spinning



around, he leapt into the limo.

Marge and the nurses were already in the limo. I shouted futilely as it sped away.

For a long moment I stared after it, trying to digest the fact that Marge was gone, that I had failed. As I slowly summoned the strength to get to my feet, the police arrived.

## CHAPTER 7

Manhattan South police station reminded me of my Grandmother's nursing home. Like the Home, the floors were covered with linoleum, and the walls were painted with paraflex. Also like the nursing home, diligent cleaning kept the odor of human urine and vomit from being more than barely noticeable.

Captain Ian Foster's office, however, was a little better; the stale odor of the vile cigars he smoked made it impossible to smell anything else. By the time the Captain got around to calling me into his office he already knew from the other witnesses what had happened at the hospital. Still he listened intently while I told him things he already knew, occasionally asking me for additional details.

When I finished describing what I'd observed, I started on what I'd been able to deduce. "Since," I began, "killing Marge would have been a great deal easier than kidnapping her, they must want to question her. That means they must have a place to take her, some kind of safe house. There really aren't many places in Manhattan where you have the kind of privacy you need for a kidnapping, but the car they used had diplomatic license plates. Therefore they took her to an embassy."

"Wrong, Sherlock," Foster snapped. "If you were right, it would mean the poor girl was beyond the reach of American law, no way we could do anything for her. Fortunately, though, the diplomatic plates don't mean anything. They're just something the kidnapers stole so they could park where they did."

"I don't think so," I replied. "First off —"

"Kent," he said very firmly, "let's get something straight. Being a Federal paper shuffler does not make you a cop. It makes you a nice guy who could easily get himself killed. In fact you're lucky you weren't killed. For all you knew the kidnapers would have shot bullets instead of tranquilizer darts. That spare tire of yours may absorb drugs, but it wouldn't stop lead."

"Please, Captain Foster," I protested, "we need to cooperate to rescue Marge."

"No," he replied flatly, "we don't have to do anything, because there isn't any we. I'm a cop. I have to do my job. You're a civilian, and you need to stay —"

He stopped himself and continued in a much softer tone. "Sorry. I'm not normally so overbearing, but you wouldn't believe the grief I've been taking because of this Lightningman thing. What I want to say is that I understand your concern, Mr. Kent. Ms. Rhoads is a friend of yours, and you want to do whatever you can to help. Unfortunately, there isn't anything you can do. I already know everything you want to tell me. Among the applications for export licenses Ms. Rhoads was processing, there were four that were highly suspicious. The attacks on her are probably related to one

Secret Identity Diet

of these applications and may involve either the IRA, the Mafia, the PLO, or the PRC CIA. It's quite a mess to sort through, but fortunately I am getting the kind of help I need. That's not the kind of help you can provide, so just leave your phone number with the desk sergeant. We'll call if there is anything you can do."

Foster was dismissing me, and there was nothing I could say that would change his mind. What was I supposed to do, tell him that the Brazilians were plotting to destroy all the gold in the world that didn't exist in the first place?

With a horrible feeling of defeat I left his office and, not bothering with the desk sergeant, left Manhattan South.

A few doors down from the police station there was the inevitable coffee shop. I took a booth at the back, drank black coffee, and tried to sort it all out. The more I thought about my problems the worse they seemed. Now that it was too late I saw that I'd committed the fatal error of not thinking ahead. To end Marge's snooping the Brazilians had planned to kill Marge as inconspicuously as possible. Her death was to be another jogger-murdered-in-Central-Park ten-second item on the 11 o'clock news.

Instead, the 11 o'clock news had been the advent of Lightningman, as had all the news since. Suddenly it seemed as though the conspirators were under attack by a supernatural opponent. I should have guessed that this would panic them and that, desperate to learn what they were up against, they'd kidnap Marge.

I hadn't, and now they had her. In a few hours the drugs they'd given Marge while kidnapping her would wear off. They'd question her, find out she didn't know anything, and kill her.

Marge was in the Brazilian Embassy with hours to live! I knew it! I couldn't prove it, but I knew it, and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it!

This was one more failure in a long row of failures. I hadn't been able to get a date for the Senior Prom in high school or college or for all the New Year's Eves that had slipped by since then. Last year I'd "celebrated" my thirty-sixth birthday alone and still a virgin. The "celebration" had consisted of eating cake and ice cream until I was violently sick.

Dr. Chang's advice had been to sort things into those I couldn't do anything about and those I could. I should be angry at myself only for the latter and I should use that anger as a spur to make myself solve the problem. Since I couldn't do anything about the present situation, I shouldn't feel guilty. In fact, even if I were the Police Commissioner I couldn't rescue Marge. The Brazilian Embassy was legally part of Brazil, absolutely beyond the reach of American law. Why, if I were President, violating the embassy would still be an act of war, something the President couldn't do without the consent of Congress. To save Marge I'd have to be more powerful than the President. I'd have to be a comic-book hero. I'd have to be Lightningman.

I'd ... have ... to ... be ... Lightningman.

## CHAPTER 8

Because of its enormous international debt, Brazil had adopted a series of extreme austerity measures. Brazil's embassy in New York, the home of



their UN ambassador, had fallen victim to one of these. Some accountant had realized that Brazil owned embassies all over the world. Expensive buildings in good locations in important cities. These could be sold for a great deal of money. Much less expensive buildings could be bought to replace them, and the difference used to keep the wolf from the door.

As a result, Brazil's New York embassy was now in the South Bronx, the middle building in a set of three four-story structures. Two separate fires had gutted the buildings to the right and left of the embassy, scarring it without seeming to do any structural damage. The left-hand building had not been completely ruined. The light of small fires danced in its broken windows. Perhaps homeless derelicts sheltered themselves there. More likely it was a crack house.

The right-hand building was too badly fire-damaged for even that kind of use. It was simply a black abandoned hulk. For my purposes that was good. Even better was the fact that the side of the building that was next to the embassy was more or less intact and the space between them was narrow.

The rest of the neighborhood looked as though there'd been a nuclear war that the news media somehow failed to cover. Rubble as far as the eye could see. Part of the rubble was from the buildings which had once stood here, and part was trash that had been dumped illegally. The odor of decaying garbage was strong, though not quite overwhelming. While a lot of the trash was potentially inflammable, fire protection was very good in this area, thanks to one of the perversities of New York politics. Firemen knew they were apt to lose their job if they lost any more of the South Bronx's few remaining buildings, and they could be counted on to defend these few survivors diligently.

Immediately after leaving the coffee shop, I had gone to the Embassy to learn the lay of the land. The next several hours I had spent planning and running around frantically to get everything my plan required. I hadn't had any time for second thoughts, which was probably just as well. Thinking about the dangers I'd soon be facing wouldn't make them any smaller and would erode my small supply of courage.

Now, with night falling, I was driving a rented pickup truck toward the embassy. In the back of the truck I had a magnesium extension ladder that could stretch to ten meters, a black bicycle from which I'd removed the reflectors, a sign that said "Advanced Peanut Butter Technology Corporation," a twin spray can of epoxy cement, and a sack. The sack in turn held a box of flares, a gallon container of silicon oil, a portable telephone, a roll of tape, a pry bar, cutting pliers, and a round aluminum plate a centimeter thick and thirty centimeters wide. On the seat beside me I had my Lightningman costume, which now consisted of my black kevlar jogging suit, a black cape, black rubber gloves, and a motorcycle helmet with a silvered visor.

After driving past the Brazilian Embassy I turned at the next corner, drove by three rubble heaps, and parked. In his classic book, *Where the Money Is*, Willie Sutton had advised would-be bank robbers to always have at least two escape routes. Following this sage advice, I took the black bicycle out of the truck and put

it on the nearest rubble pile. With a little bit of assorted trash sprinkled on it, it stopped being a new bicycle and became just more trash.

Returning to the truck, I drove to the right-hand burned-out building and parked. The truck would be my other line of escape.

After getting the sign, I sprayed its back with both components of the epoxy cement. Carrying it I trotted out onto the street. The Brazilian Embassy only had one sign out front to tell people what it was. I slapped my sign on top of it and hurried away.

As soon as I got back to the truck I got my costume, the sack, and the ladder, and started climbing. New York City had long ago given up tearing down abandoned buildings as too expensive and settled for removing their stairways. This made it very convenient to climb the stairwell by ladder. On the fourth floor, however, I found that there didn't seem to be any way up to the roof of this building. In fact there wasn't all that much roof.

That was all right. I'd just find a good place to lean my ladder from the fourth floor of this building to the roof of the embassy. As it turned out there were three places where that would be practical. Two of these positions were directly opposite dark embassy windows and the third opposite a brightly lighted window. Since the lighted window had closed Venetian blinds, there was no danger anyone would look out it and see me. Its light would make it easier for me to work quietly.

One end of my ladder was bent into a hook. I took everything out of the sack except the flares, the pry bar, the cutting pliers, and the silicon oil, and tied the sack to the hook end of the ladder. As silently as I possibly could, I placed the hook on the embassy roof and planted its feet as firmly as I could.

Next, I taped the aluminum plate to my chest and then put on my costume. The helmet would protect my head if they tried to club me, and the kevlar suit would protect me from ordinary pistol bullets. There wasn't any way I could completely protect myself against the supergun.

The best I could do was the aluminum plate. The lightning-stroke emblem on my chest was a natural target. Anyone firing at me would be tempted to aim at it. With a one-centimeter-thick aluminum plate hidden under the emblem I should be all right.

I'd also taken the precaution of removing the other lightning insignia from the jogging suit and attaching it to the cape. When I ran, the cape would stream behind me. Maybe in the dark people would be tricked into shooting at me where I wasn't. Maybe.

My mouth was dry, and ice worms were crawling down my spine. There was only one way I could avoid letting all my courage leak away: I had to keep moving, keep on taking the next step of my plan.

I picked up the portable phone and dialed 911. "I am," I told the operator, "Doctor Anton Borzack, President of the Advanced Peanut Butter Technology Corporation. We're having a very serious fire." After giving the operator the address of the Brazilian Embassy, I buttoned off.

The clock was now running. In the next few minutes I had to carry out the rest of my plan. After crossing to

the Embassy roof I had to find the main intake for the ventilation system. I'd light my flares and drop them into the silicon oil. That would fill the building with remarkably unpleasant smoke. Next, I'd cut the electric power line with my pliers, plunging the Embassy into darkness. Using the pry bar I'd force open a roof door. While the firemen were below, forcing their way into the "Advanced Peanut Butter Technology Corporation," I'd find Marge somehow and we'd escape.

It was a good plan. It actually could work ... or it could if I'd spent months checking every detail instead of hours. With such an enormous number of things that could go wrong, did I really have a chance?

Did I, Charles Kent, a fat bald man who'd never won a fight in his life, have any hope of beating the Government of Brazil, a sovereign nation with an army, navy, and air force?

I knew the answer to that. Bottom line — I knew that what I was doing was a doomed stupidity, but I also knew that they were going to kill Marge.

Even if she wouldn't date me, she was still my friend. A very good friend. That was why I'd dared ask her for a date.

While I'd lost every fight in childhood, there was a reason why I'd lost. I'd let the bullies start the fights on their terms, one of me and lots of them. The more I thought about that, the angrier it made me. I'd spent my life being attacked by bullies, and as an adult I'd been constantly mocked and insulted by people like my boss, Sam Hand.

Last night I'd done something different. I'd attacked. The odds had been hopelessly against me and still I'd attacked and won! The odds hadn't mattered because they'd had small stomachs for anything that looked like a real fight.

Tonight I was again attacking. The odds were worse but I was attacking! Win or lose, live or die, this would be very different from all those fights I'd lost.

With a burst of resolve I mounted the ladder. Before I'd climbed three rungs, it started to rain, an absolute downpour. I was instantly drenched; howling winds were throwing sheets of water on me. The sky was split by blinding strokes of lightning and deafening thunder.

Though it made me wet and vastly uncomfortable, maybe the storm would help me. The little girl last night had said that Lightningman only flew at night when it thundered. Of course no one with any sense would believe that ... or they wouldn't if you told them face to face. Hearing it on the 11 o'clock news might be different.

I continued to climb and made my first mistake: I looked down.

I was a long way up.

What if I slipped? What if the ladder broke? Ladders aren't very strong if you place them at a 45-degree angle the way I —

Abruptly I noticed something else to worry about. There were two lengths of wire leading from the pole in the street to the Embassy. Until this moment I'd only noticed one, the one that led to the Embassy's roof. I'd assumed that it was electric power and that once I was on the roof I'd have no trouble cutting it. Now, however, I saw that a second line went from the pole

to the side of the building. I was now directly above it. If it was the phone line I could proceed as planned. If, however, it was the power line, my whole attack plan was doomed.

No point in worrying about that now. If I'd blundered it was too late to redeem the mistake. With a considerable effort of will I forced down my fears and kept on climbing.

Glancing toward the Embassy I saw that the Venetian blinds were set at something close to a 45-degree angle. A few more steps and I could look through them into the room beyond. Tensely I climbed and saw — Marge!

The scene was exactly what I'd expected and feared. Marge was helpless, tied into a chair, and a man, naked to the waist, his head covered by a black hood, was menacing her with a red-hot poker. The man was larger than I and all muscle, which means that he was an absolute monster.

In utter horror I realized that I was too late again! There was no way I could reach Marge in time. Even if I could, what was I supposed to do against a man big enough to be Godzilla's stand-in? Marge was doomed and so was I, doomed to be an ineffective fool who stood by helplessly, unable to do anything!

"NO!" I screamed in desperate frustration, shaking the ladder in impotent rage.

The ladder cracked.

It wasn't a loud sound but I've never heard anything more ominous. For a long moment I stood absolutely frozen. I couldn't see what part of the ladder had broken and maybe it was a nonessential part. Maybe if I was very careful I could still get across. Maybe if the ladder did break, only the bottom half would fall. The top half had a hook, and if I clung to the top half I'd be slammed into the side of the Embassy. If I could keep my grip on the ladder I might still be able to climb up to the roof. If, maybe, perhaps, and for sure I was a long way up and would make a very ugly mess when I hit the cement below. Under my gloves my hands were covered in cold sweat and tiny very delicate butterflies danced in my stomach and there wasn't any choice. I had to take the chance, had to hope that the ladder wouldn't break when I shifted my weight. Slowly, very slowly, because it was the hardest thing I'd ever done, I took a step up the ladder.

With a crack like thunder it broke.

The bottom half fell from under my feet. Clinging desperately to the top half I saw that I wasn't going to smash into the wall of the Embassy. I was headed straight for the lighted window.

*Crash.*

Amidst a shower of shattered glass and twisted Venetian blinds I burst through the window. Dead ahead of me was the hooded giant with the red-hot poker in his hand. He stared up at me, hatred and surprise in his deep-sunk black eyes. There was no way I could avoid slamming into him with enormous force. I thrust my right arm, fist clenched, in front of me.

With a horrendous impact my fist connected with his jaw. The pain was unbelievable. I was sure I'd broken every bone in my hand. Like billiard balls striking one another, our impact brought me to a halt and sent him flying. When he hit the floor, he just lay

there unmoving.

"My God!" a pompous-looking man in a business suit was shouting, "He's killed Ironjaw with one punch! HE'S REAL!" Three other equally pompous-looking men in suits were staring at me in wide-eyed horror. Ferretface, however, was drawing his gun, a silenced .22. Stepping between him and Marge, I stuck out my chest. Outside the Embassy there was a thunderous crash. Blazing white light filled the window through which I'd just come, and the light in this room died.

Ferretface started shooting at me, his bullets slamming into the lightning insignia with impacts I scarcely noticed.

The men in business suits were all rushing to get away, shoving each other in a frantic struggle to get through the only door. His gun empty, Ferretface cursed and followed them.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to think. Through dumb luck I'd just won a battle. How could I convert that into winning the war?

Looking out the window I saw why the lights had gone out: the falling ladder had snapped the power line. Maybe that had caused an arc which ignited the magnesium ladder, or maybe dropping four floors had ignited the box of flares. Whatever the cause, the result had been that the ladder and the flares were burning with incandescent fury. The white smoke clouds from the silicon oil were illuminated from underneath by a light brighter than the sun.

While this wasn't quite what I'd planned, it certainly would do. I could hear the sirens of approaching fire engines. That meant I had one and only one heaven-sent opportunity to make it all work.

Marge was screaming at me, "Hey, cut me loose!" Unfortunately, I'd forgotten to bring a knife. I'd zero manual dexterity left in my right hand.

Trying to undo her bonds with my left hand would take time we didn't have. The Brazilians would recover from their initial panic and counterattack.

I smelled burning carpet. Looking down I saw Ironjaw's poker. Grabbing it by the cooler end, I applied the hot end to the ropes at the points where they were tied to the chair. Being nylon they melted quite easily. In a moment enough of her bonds were severed so that Marge could free herself, which she rapidly did.

As soon as she was free, Marge looked around rapidly, staring briefly at the shattered window, the unconscious Ironjaw, and the spent bullets that lay shattered on the floor. "Who," she snapped with a little panic and a lot of anger in her voice, "are you? What are you? What's going on?"

"I'm a friend," I replied in a gentle and reasonable tone, "and we're in a building full of heavily-armed men who want to kill us. We have to make a run for it and I want you to stay behind me."

"Why," she snapped hysterically, "should I stay behind any man?"

"You aren't bulletproof."

She opened her mouth to make an angry reply, couldn't find a good one, and shut it. When I started toward the door, she followed close behind. Passing through the doorway I found myself in a long narrow hallway dimly illuminated by battery-powered emergency lights and mercifully empty. As we hurried past

the many doors that lined this hallway I knew that any of them could open and disgorge an army.

None did. We reached a stairway and started hurrying down it. From below I could hear a disturbance, people shouting in Portuguese and other people shouting back at them in English. My plan was working! The New York City Fire Department had smashed their way into the Embassy! All we had to do was get to the first floor and we'd be safe!

As we passed the third floor, I felt a surge of exultation. We were actually doing it! If we could just get down two more floors —

The stairway ended on the second floor with a fire door. If the layout of this building was the same as its ruined twin's, the fire door would open onto a long corridor with the stairway to the first floor at the far end of that corridor.

It was a perfect shooting gallery. If the Brazilians were going to make any effort to stop us, it would be here. Maybe they hadn't had time. Maybe I'd moved fast enough and they were still in panic.

Maybe, and maybe a lot of less pleasant things.

The only thing I could be sure about was that waiting would make our chances worse. Hitting the door full tilt I charged into the hallway beyond. Ferretface was waiting at the far end of it with something that looked horribly like an anti-tank weapon. "Feed me!" he shouted at the business-suited man behind him.

He hadn't had a chance to load his weapon! All I had to do was run fast enough and we'd be home free.

I'd never run as hard as I did then, and never had it seemed as slow. With each stride I seemed to be pulling my legs out of honey. My lungs were burning, my heart racing, I was twenty meters from my foe, and he was shouting, "Put in the bloody rocket!"

The suited man's eyes were wide with terror. He was staring at me as though I were all his nightmares made real. He seemed to be paralyzed with fear. Only fifteen meters separated us now and he moved, pushing something into the back of Ferretface's weapon.

"Now we'll see how bloody super you are!" Ferretface snarled as he sighted on my chest. At ten meters he pulled the trigger.

Instant nothing. He was forgetting to release the safety.

I was coming at him like an express train, my left fist raised in front of me. Five meters separated us, and he started fumbling for the safety.

At four meters his eyes widened. He was seeing my fist and remembering what I'd done to Ironjaw.

Only three meters now, and he was in full panic, his hand clawing at the safety with less manual dexterity than a dog pawing at a door knob.

Two meters, I knew I'd won, but he clicked off the safety and fired.

*He fired straight into my chest!*

To my utter astonishment I wasn't killed. Though the rocket struck me with staggering force, it didn't penetrate the aluminum plate I was wearing. It stuck there, shoving furiously at me while spraying my foes with incandescent exhaust. Abruptly I realized that the rocket might explode at any instant. When I grabbed it, it twisted in my grip and shot out of my

grasp. Ferretface and Business Suit leapt out of the way as the rocket came roaring back at them. By the time it reached the wall behind them it was going at tremendous speed. With a thunderous crash it vanished from sight. The empty rocket launcher dropping from his nerveless fingers, Ferretface stared at me as though I were the Devil come to take him to Hell. He turned and fled while his companion cowered against the wall and soiled the pants of his three-piece suit.

Rushing past him, Marge and I headed down the stairs. The first floor of the Embassy was a chaos of shadows and glaring flashlights, people who couldn't see who was who shouting furiously at each other through roiling white smoke. Turning back to Marge I picked her up. Shouting, "Injured woman! Coming through!" I forced my way through the crowd.

As I expected, most of the Embassy staff weren't involved in the conspiracy and moved readily out of my way. As I neared the NYC firemen, a man in a rumpled but expensive suit pointed at me and shouted, "Stop that man! He's violating the diplomatic immunity of this —"

"Look, Buddy," a fireman said firmly, lifting his ax a bit to get the man's attention, "like I been telling you, peanut butter factories don't have diplomatic immunity, and even if they did, it wouldn't protect them from fire."

Ahead of me I could see what had been the Embassy's front door, now reduced to kindling by the firemen's axes. Another few steps and I was outside, standing on the steps of the Embassy and looking at the street, which was crowded with three fire trucks, one police car, two ambulances, and a Channel 7 news van.

"I'd done it! *I'd actually done it!* ... but of course, that TV news van could easily make this a very expensive victory. If I was caught, if Lightningman was exposed as nothing but fat bald me, that would be the end of my job and any hope of a normal life.

With Marge still cradled in my arms I hurried toward the closer of the two ambulances. It was still raining, and the sky was frequently split by intense flashes of lightning. The rear door of the ambulance was open, and, while there weren't any attendants in evidence, there was someone sitting in the driver's seat.

He turned and stared at me with wide eyes as I entered and put Marge down. "COLUMBIA PRESBYTERIAN HOSPITAL," I ordered, "STAT!"

Either because of my costume or because I used the doctor word for hurry, he obeyed. With a shriek of burning rubber the ambulance took off.

"You'll want to turn left at the next corner," I told the driver, "but take it slow. The road is very slippery there."

He nodded agreement, and just after we rounded the corner I hopped out the back door. Somehow I kept my feet and ran to the spot where I'd planted the bicycle. In a moment I was speeding away on it, recklessly racing across rubble-strewn vacant lots.

When I was several blocks from the Embassy I saw something in the distance: an ancient and long abandoned phone booth. That seemed too clear an omen to

ignore. I entered and shed my Lightningman costume. Dressed as Charles Kent, an ordinary Civil Service employee, I pedaled back to my rented truck. Surprisingly it still had all its hubcaps.

The adrenaline high which had carried me through this night's dangers was rapidly fading, leaving me utterly exhausted. My right hand throbbed, as did my ribs and legs. I was in pain and too tired to pay it much attention. When I finally got back to my apartment I collapsed onto the couch, unable, unwilling to move another muscle.

Somehow, though, it all felt very good. The TV turned itself on for the 11 o'clock news. Paying it no heed I fell asleep, secure in the knowledge that finally, for once in my life, I'd done something and gotten it right.

## CHAPTER 9

When I woke the next morning my right hand was extremely swollen, I hurt all over, and all the pains were the aches that came from a hard job well done. I'd never felt better in my life.

After shaving, showering, and pouring myself a lovely cup of steaming hot black coffee, I turned on the TV. I'd been hoping to get some news, but there's nothing on on Saturday morning except cartoons. Well, why not?

The slender costumed hero came flying through the window, his cape billowing behind him, felling the black-hooded torturer with a blow. As the second bad guy raised his gun to shoot the helpless girl, the hero stepped in front of her and the bullets bounced off his chest. So did the anti-tank —

Oops! That wasn't a cartoon! It was last night! It was me, but I didn't look like that! They'd adjusted the height to width ratio to make me slender!

Peter Jennings appeared and said, "Once again we apologize for the technical quality of these tapes. They were taken by very old security cameras in the Brazilian Embassy, and while we have edited them to enhance the quality, some problems cannot be corrected — I've just been informed that there's been an important development. We take you now to Harvey Ferrel at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital."

The scene shifted to Ferrel standing in front of Columbia Presbyterian. After thanking Jennings, identifying himself, and repeating his location, Ferrel said, "Virtually every news organization in the world has been trying to get an interview with Ms. Marge Rhoads, the woman Lightningman has rescued twice. So have a great many law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Ms. Rhoads has agreed to one interview with representatives of all the interested organizations on condition that all these organizations refrain from contacting her for 48 hours after this one interview. She says she's been through a lot and needs some time to rest."

Ferrel disappeared to be replaced by a hospital room scene: Marge, looking much prettier than ever before, was sitting up in a hospital bed. "To anticipate your questions, let me begin by saying that I know virtually nothing about this ... Lightningman, is it? I was unconscious during our first encounter, and during our second what I saw was what all of you saw on the

security camera tapes."

From off camera the first questioner said, "Gail Newbery, CNN, what did you feel when that horrible hooded man was approaching you with a red-hot poker? How were you terrified?"

"Actually," Marge replied cheerfully, "he didn't really bother me because I could see it was all just a piece of theater they were doing to intimidate me. The one I was really frightened of was the man they called Rat-boy. I'm very glad he's in custody, because he was obviously a professional killer and I knew he couldn't afford to let me live."

From the second questioner came, "Marvin Thornberger, ABC. Was your investigation of whatever the Brazilians were up to a stand-alone effort, or were other federal agencies conducting parallel efforts?"

"So far as I know," Marge told him, "our investigation in Export Control was the only investigation being done by the U.S. government."

After half an hour of answering dumb questions and not knowing the answers to the few intelligent questions that were asked, Marge waved her hands. "Please," she said, "I realize that something tremendously important has happened and that people are intensely interested to hear whatever I may know about it, but the fact of the matter is that I really don't have much I can tell you. I agreed to this interview largely so that I could make that clear."

After a recap by Harvey Ferrel outside Columbia Presbyterian, the scene shifted back to Peter Jennings in the ABC studio. He was sitting in the middle of a group of men and women, their chairs arranged in a semicircle. "Before," he said, "we continue our discussion of the Lightningman phenomenon with our panel of experts, I want to reshoot a tape. ABC's New York affiliate, the Channel 7 News Team, took this tape of Lightningman leaving the Brazilian Embassy."

Jennings's smiling face was replaced by a night scene. There I was riding my bicycle across vacant lots. While the lightning stroke insignia on my cape was rather visible, my body was a black blur, and the bicycle was totally invisible. The result was that I appeared to be flying a few feet above the ground. When the tape ended, Jennings turned to the man in an Air Force Uniform on his right and asked, "Major Smythe, you and your team have spent most of the night analyzing copies of the Channel 7 tapes. Can you say with certainty that the appearance of flying in these tapes is not an illusion?"

"I can," he replied. "After doing a number of measurements I can definitely state that the person they show is two to three meters off the ground and traveling fast enough to do the mile in less than three minutes."

"Why," Jennings asked, "would Lightningman fly so low?"

"Same reason we do in the Air Force, to avoid enemy radar."

Listening to the square-jawed Air Force Major's firm, decisive answers I had a surreal feeling. Riding that bicycle last night I hadn't been any two to three meters off the ground, but... my cape had been streaming above and behind me like a kite. The lightning-

stroke reflector on my cape probably had been two meters off the ground, and it was what the Air Force Major had measured. While mistakes of that kind were easy to make, wouldn't people have enough sense not to compound such mistakes into total absurdity?

Maybe, but right now there wasn't any sign of a return to common sense.

The caption identified the man to Smythe's right as General Clayton Taylor, U.S. Army Infantry. "What impressed me," he put in, "was not the flying —"

"Wait a minute!" Smythe protested. "There can't be any doubt about his flying! Not only do the ABC tapes prove it, the Brazilian tapes show him sailing in through a bloody fourth-floor window!"

"Yes," General Taylor agreed, "but after that, Lightningman didn't just fly away with the girl. That proves his flying is very limited. He can't carry much weight. What's truly awesome is his invulnerability. Not merely were pistol bullets completely harmless to him, but he took a direct hit from an anti-tank weapon, an A-27 kinetic energy penetrator, without blinking."

"General," Peter Jennings prompted, "would you mind explaining to our audience how a kinetic energy penetrator differs from a bullet?"

"Bullets," he replied, "are made of lead or steel and tend to flatten on impact. The A-27 hits its target with a twelve-hundred-gram slug of depleted uranium 2 centimeters wide by 40 long, traveling at 2 kilometers per second. On impact the outer layer of a depleted uranium slug slows down and the center keeps on going. It literally sharpens itself so that you get as much energy as a conventional high explosives shell focused at a point. For this Lightningman to take a hit from a weapon like that at point-blank range and not be hurt is absolutely astonishing."

Actually, I thought, you, General, are an idiot not to see that what saved me was the range. To get up to speed a rocket has to accelerate over a considerable distance. With only two meters to travel before it hit me, the A-27 — I started punching numbers into my pocket calculator, but I didn't have enough data to work the problem. No matter. That damned thing had hit me hard enough.

On the TV, Sam Fox, a sportscaster, was saying that Lightningman had flattened Ironjaw McGurt with one punch, something Evander Holyfield hadn't been able to do in fifteen rounds, and that this was proof of my superhuman strength. The fact that Ironjaw had been retired from boxing for more than a decade did not seem to have occurred to him.

Professor Charles Havermeier, Harvard University, Department of Exobiology, pointed out that Lightningman had shouted "NO!" while he was still outside a closed room, proof of X-ray vision. Furthermore, Ms. Rhoads's bonds hadn't been cut or broken. They'd been burned, proof of heat vision.

I was about to start laughing aloud at this highly educated fool when Peter Jennings interrupted the Professor to say, "I've just been given a bulletin. The Government of Brazil has voided the diplomatic immunity of all Brazilian diplomatic personnel throughout the world. While the Brazilian Government gave no reasons for this extraordinary action, they obviously want to distance themselves from

whatever their diplomats were doing. If —"

I changed channels and spent the next hour or so finding out that NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox, and PBS were saying largely the same thing as was ABC. Literally everyone was convinced that Lightningman was real, a supernatural being from another planet.

CNN was the first to start airing details of the Brazilian scheme to ruin the world's financial system. Quite a few of the network anchors started commenting on the FBI's performance in this affair. While it was all well and good that Lightningman had saved the world from this disaster, wasn't that what we paid the FBI for? So far there was nothing to indicate that the Bureau had had the faintest notion what was going down. The fact that the CIA, the NYPD, Scotland Yard, MI5, and every other law enforcement and intelligence agency in the world had also been asleep at the switch was hardly an excuse. There were, however, some commentators who thought that it might not be quite fair to the FBI to condemn them for failing where Lightningman succeeded. After all they didn't have invulnerability, X-ray vision, etc.

After turning off the TV, I sipped my coffee and spent some time thinking. Ever since I'd blundered my way into this Lightningman thing, I'd been afraid of being found out. I was fat, bald and approaching middle age, all things a hero wasn't supposed to be. Being exposed as Lightningman would be a disaster for me ... and an absolute catastrophe for the FBI, the CIA, the NYPD, etc. Once they realized that unmasking Lightningman was very much not in their interest, I could probably stop worrying.

This happy thought lasted until there was a knock on my door, a very insistent knock. Fearing the worst, I opened the door and got a very pleasant surprise. "Marge!" I exclaimed, "Please, come in! Why aren't you still in the hospital?"

"They don't keep you that long for cracked ribs," She replied. She looked tired, and I gestured for her to sit down on the couch. She took the cup of coffee I offered her, sipped it, and said, "Thanks."

"Do you like my coffee?" I asked inanely, not having anything sensible to say.

"No. Your coffee's terrible," she told me. "I meant thanks for saving my life twice." Looking at the astonishment on my face, she added, "Well, Charles, we've worked together in the same office for years. I admit it took me a moment to recognize you in that getup, but did you really think I wouldn't?"

Nearly all of the time I'm a very mild-tempered person, but sometimes anger I just can't control flares up. This was one of those times. "Yes!" I snapped. "I thought that if I made Lightningman convincing, if I made him really seem to be a hero, then no one would see that there was a fat, bald man underneath. I was especially sure that you wouldn't see because you wouldn't date me!"

"Charles," she said with a tone of dangerous patience, "you didn't ask me for a date. You asked me to dinner."

"What's the difference?" I demanded.

"What you asked me for," she said firmly, "was an excuse to go off your diet. My late father was always asking my mother for excuses not to diet, and she

wound up a widow at age 50. You, Charles, are the finest man I've ever met, and I knew that long ago. Letting myself fall in love with you would be pathetically easy, but I'm not willing to love a man who's going to leave me the way Dad left Mom."

Suddenly I felt deflated. Marge was being completely fair and honest. Her reasons for rejecting me weren't superficial ... if ... she was rejecting me. "Marge," I said, trying not to sound too hopeful, "you seem to be saying two different things. Do you mean that you might have said yes if I'd asked you to go ice skating or something like that?"

She smiled at me and slowly replied, "Actually, Charles, I was thinking that I could get another kevlar jogging suit. We could run through the park every night as Lightningman and Ms. Thunder."

"That would be wonderful!" I exclaimed. "How will we work it? I mean your apartment's so far from here that —"

Stopping me with a smile, she said, "Charles, one of the things I find most attractive about you is that you're so shy. You've outdone James Bond and you don't see the obvious. I'm going to move in with you."

"Move in?" I asked, smiling with moronic eagerness as I sat down very close to her.

"Yes," she answered, "but, of course, you understand we can't have sex, until —"

"Until your ribs heal," I supplied. "Yes, surely, Darling, I understand completely," I declared as I kissed her very gently.

Though she responded with considerable passion, when we came up for air she said firmly, "No. My ribs are well taped. We can't have sex until you lose another 70 pounds. After that, there's going to be a schedule for weight loss. To keep on having sex, you're going to stay on that schedule."

"In dieting, as in living, the keys to success are motivation and discipline." — Dr. K. K. Chang, *The Use of Zen Philosophy in Weight Loss* □

## This is a double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription, or one if you paid the quarterly rate.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.



# Bag of Bones

By E R Stewart

Art by Lori Deitrick

They were many months on the road, with only a few days more to go, and although the temptation was to hurry, to get the job done, they kept their pace reasonable. To be rid of the last vestiges of damnable man, though, was a goal that made resting a chore, an accomplishment that chased sleep and disrupted the appetites.

Kerr broke the stick and tossed half into the fire. He scratched his muzzle with the other half of the stick. Tears trickled from the corners of his eyes and matted the fur beneath. He batted smoke away and moved back, curling his tail around his toes. "Wood's green," he said.

"Kindling's gone, too, so don't lose the flame," Rompard said, her teeth a flash in the gloaming as she gutted a tailfish and savored its blood.

The pair sat quietly. Crickets chirped and the wings of owls scuffed the night. Far off a stream trickled. Rompard waddled to it eventually, and fetched a pot of water. When the tailfish boiled, the pair shared thin soup, which they lapped.

Clouds scudded from the west, where the gathering clamored in the red fires of Ash Mountain's fresh wounds. Dark were the clouds, and fierce the winds that tore at them on high as the mountain raged.

Down in the level land, Kerr shivered. "Hear the pain? The land agonizes."

"It's never different."

"It's never the same, either, cub-mother."

They fed the fire all night, each dozing as the other watched, the other watching as each dozed, a balanced scale of reciprocal concern and duty shouldered without complaint.

When a slash of crimson announced dawn, Rompard touched her mate's pelt with a hind paw. "Ever and anon," she said.

He stirred, but Kerr was in the midst of terror-dreams and could not yet wake. Muscles rippled under fur in revulsion, and when finally his eyes popped open, he sat up and shrieked, "Forever."

Rompard offered him pine-needle tea, saying nothing. When tea was blood, as the elders said of finishing the drink, they packed and began walking, with Kerr in the lead. He carried their meager provisions and their single, battered pot, while Rompard followed, carrying only the bag of bones. She used both hands, and gazed often at it.

The meadow where they'd sought rest and sleep gave way downhill to a bog. Their pelts repelled

most of the dank water, but sticky green algae clung to them like a basting.

"Spitted, we'd pass as greenroast," Kerr said.

They washed each other when they stopped for a mid-day rest, using their long, brusque tongues to clean each tuft of fur. "Tastes of trees," was Rompard's only observation, while Kerr her mate said only, "Shuddersome."

They passed through the bog before dark, and climbed an oak to rest the night again. High off the ground, they dared no fire. Dried tailfish eaten cold lay in a brittle clump in their bellies as they tried to sleep.

It was Kerr who noticed the smell. He rolled to his right and caught the branch with one paw as he started to fall. Hanging, he whistled a cry of cautious alarm. He heard rustling as Rompard came awake and rolled off her branch to hang. To her hiss of inquiry he whistled, "Catchers, maybe."

For a few moments they dangled from limbs, hardly daring to breathe.

Catchers struck the tree's upper leaves like a descending tornado. Talons slashed through leaves and chunked splinters from branches.

Kerr and Rompard let go their limbs and dropped to lower branches. The very branch on which Kerr had slept burst asunder, filling his pelt with splinters. The scent of catchers roiled around them like oil-smoke, ruining the good smell of fresh-cut wood. The tree shook and swayed as if caught in a fight of furious winds.

Rompard leapt from branch to branch, seeking the most protection. She passed the bag of bones to Kerr, who also tried to keep moving. It was awkward having one hand constantly engaged, so he switched the bag to his mouth.

As he did it, however, it slipped. He wailed, then whistled, "Dropped it."

"The bag?" Rompard hissed back. "We mustn't let them have it."

Just then a catcher slavered through a nimbus of leaves. Its spittle splashed Kerr's face, but missed his eyes. The slaver burned. Kerr released the limb from which he swung and fell with a moan of apology and desperation.

Rompard, free of encumbrance and not being attacked, scampered down the trunk. She found





Kerr on the ground. He was groaning from the fall's impact, but held up the bag of bones proudly. Above them, the catcher slashed and roared.

Another of the leathery flyers struggled through the tree toward them, but by now Kerr had loaded his sling. The water-rounded stone found its mark, and a catcher, spitting fiercely, tumbled broken to the ground to twitch itself dead, its brains leaking.

Before another catcher came, Rompard hid the bag of bones under some bushes. Kerr, sling slung across his shoulder, scampered after her. They moved into the underbrush at the edge of the forest. "I killed one," Kerr said, panting. "They'll leave now." He wiped spit from his face with water from a small skin he carried. "Foulness and stagnation, this hurts."

"Your tongue could cut stone," Rompard scolded. "You sound almost human."

He glared at her, then asked her to check his wounds. She wiped at his facial fur with gentle fingers, then licked them clean and spat. "You'll live, my den-mate."

"Then I'll suffer."

She nuzzled his nose and clucked in amusement. "Suffering's one of the pleasures of life."

The second catcher burst then from the tree, soaring upward so quickly that it seemed to evaporate. The tree's shaking slowed. Leaves and twigs stopped falling. Kerr and Rompard crept back to retrieve the bag of bones. As Kerr pulled it from beneath a laurel, Rompard knelt by the dead catcher. She greased the inside of a small skin, then filled it by leaning on the base of the catcher's single eye, which emptied the spit-sacs. "I'll splash them, if they dare return," she said. The viscous grey fluid bubbled and smoked slightly. "It's warm," she said, crimping a top onto the small sac of acid.

"Warm like the fire in the ground," Kerr said.

They continued their journey before dawn, neither wanting sleep. The ground swelled as they neared Ash Mountain, and soon they struggled up steep slopes on which small pines grew in sparse clumps. Cracks in the ground vented noxious steam. Small craters bubbled. "This land begs for pity," Kerr said.

"It begs for this bag of bones," Rompard said, taking it from her mate, needing to share the burden.

On the crest of a hill they glimpsed Ash Mountain. It stood silhouetted against a reddened sky like a tall cone decapitated by its own fury. Reds, oranges, and yellows rolled down the mountain in channels and fissures. Black smoke, white steam, and ochre clouds obscured details, even as dawn gained in intensity.

Soon the mountain's odors reached the pair. Their throats tickled. Their noses burned. Headaches flared in their narrow skulls, and glit-

tery points of light appeared randomly in the jelly of their eyes. Rompard vomited, but cleaned it decently before Kerr had to sick himself in sympathy.

When a stone reared up in Kerr's path, he halted and raised his forepaws, claws extended. The stone was thrice his height and many times his mass, with sharp quartz protrusions and hollows where swirled wisps of steam. The stone quivered, and Kerr stepped back a pace.

Behind Kerr, Rompard clutched the bag of bones. "Even the stones want to stop us," she said, voice quavering.

"Only some," Kerr answered, trying to sound brave and confident.

The stone swayed then, making a grinding roar that vibrated the ground. It fell then, too, but to one side, not toward the pair.

"You see?" Kerr said, although his voice sounded unconvincing even in his own ears. They'd met much resistance in the past few months, but nothing truly magical, nothing like earth-forces and rearing stones.

They continued their sojourn, knowing now that they'd crossed into that region surrounding Ash Mountain called The Ground of Sorrows. It was said that here topsoil was never thick enough to hold the living stones down, never weighty enough to blanket the shivers or muffle the moans of bedrock.

Kerr pushed on, in a hurry now, his stumpy legs a blur, his ringed tail twitching with extra alertness.

Ash Mountain surged into view as they walked the curve of a valley of pumice, and for a moment they stood gaping. Dark even in day, the mountain loomed like the shadow of a god. Yellow sparks flew, scarlet gashes flared, lava burst through the mountain's troubled flesh. Cinders filled the air and fell in a constant black snow that brought the threat of poisoning and suffocation.

Set against this backdrop, even the high Douglas firs where Kerr and Rompard normally lived were dwarfed into insignificance.

"We must hurry," Rompard said.

Kerr glanced back, worry stiffening his tail. "You feel it, too, then. The urgency."

She waddled to him and they kept going arm-in-arm.

And now forest creatures such as stag, elk, moose, and bear lined the edge of the woods to watch them. Hares, rabbits, and field-mice trotted across the pair's path, never greeting or hindering in any way. Birds squawked from a few leaps above their heads, and Kerr noticed that even insects, clouds of gnats in particular, made way for them.

Their climb past the first of the big rocks tossed down by Ash Mountain's consternation proved harder than they'd expected. They had to use ingenuity, balance, and grace to negotiate some of the

surfaces, and luck alone explained why neither fell in some places.

Once past the first ring of stones they came upon a hot, flat area, where steam rose from the ground despite the absence of fissures or cracks. The pair donned footgear, copied from memories no single forest creature possessed, based upon memories all forest creatures shared, those of man.

Of bark, their shoes soon smoldered. "My feet will flame," Kerr said.

"At least it's flat here," Rompard said. "Let's hurry." She hefted the bag of bones from one shoulder to the other and scurried on. Rubble separated them from some of the heat, so they were able to rest a few moments after the hasty griddle-crossing.

Then came a steeper climb than the rocks had offered, for cliffs rose sheer before them. Rompard used the catcher spit to sizzle footholds, and they reached the plateau's top before night again cast doubt on their efforts.

"Is it safe to rest, so close?" Kerr wanted to know.

Rompard shrugged and nibbled some dried tail-fish. "It's surely not safe to go on as we are, in this terrain, so worn and sore."

Kerr answered with a tail-twitch, and for a time they curled together, arms and legs and tails embracing.

The moon cleared the haggard uppermost peak of Ash Mountain some time after that. Its light awoke them. They decided to go on. "We can do it by night as well as by day," Rompard said. "The ritual demands only that it be done."

Kerr said nothing. Taking up the bag of bones, he tied it to his back, then scrambled upward on the smoky scree.

Rompard followed, in case he fell.

They came finally to the top of the mountain, breathless. Not only did altitude and effort snatch away their breath, but acrid smoke, invisible fumes, and noxious ventings choked and burned them, too.

They stood on a ridge. Behind them, far down, lay the griddle they'd crossed, and the outer ring of flung stones, and past that the forests, some burning and some still green. It was their world, down there, what was left.

In front of them was a verge. Kerr's toes clutched downward at the lip of the edge, and he gazed down past them at the roiling lava, which seemed to leap up at them like new life eager to find a shape, a form.

Bright in the night, the reds and oranges and yellows of Ash Mountain's rage sloshed and slammed like a storm-wrought sea rising for vengeance.

Rompard took the bag of bones from Kerr's back. Together they squatted and opened it. "The last," Kerr said, taking a handful of bones and tossing them down into the greedy, imperious magma.

Bag of Bones

Rompard helped her mate throw away the rest of the bones, but she paused at the very last, the final one. It was spherical on top, a dome of bone, the skull of a creature whose species had once held dominion over the earth and all its flora and fauna. Holding it so that its empty sockets gazed back at her curious gaze, Rompard watched for a moment as firelight played hide-and-seek in the skull's hollows.

After a few seconds of silent staring, she tossed it, too, into the mountain's wounds. It was done. As far as any animal on earth could tell, every single human bone had been found, dug up, and sent back into the planet's molten core. All traces of man's dominion were gone, to the best of the best animals' abilities.

"What did you wish?" Kerr asked, as they made their way downward, duty done.

Rompard clicked a chuckle. "Wish? I was wondering, not wanting."

"Did you wonder Why?"

She didn't answer her mate at once, but concentrated on sliding down a slope studded with sharp obsidian. Once past this obstacle she said, "I wondered what they'd seen through those eyes of theirs. Surely they couldn't have seen the same world we see."

They came down from the mountain exhausted but fulfilled. The other forest animals greeted them as heroes, and the pair celebrated as they roamed back toward their home, where they lived with the renowned calm of squirrels for the rest of their lives. □

## Moving?

If you plan to move between now and December, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

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# The Last from Heinlein



We can let posterity decide whether Robert A. Heinlein was the greatest science fiction writer of all time. I think it likely, though we have to admit that history is full of upsets. There was a time when Sidonius Apollinaris (5th century Gallo-Roman bishop, poet, and saint) was held to be a great writer, but to 20th Century taste he is an empty, sorry example of the decadence of late classical Latin literature.

We also have to admit that Heinlein isn't as accepted elsewhere as he is in the United States. "Am I correct in assuming," I once asked a British SF professional at a London gathering, "that Heinlein is a purely American writer, and that Europeans have little use for him?" "Well, his books sell," was the reply, "but it isn't respectable to admit liking them."

Let's just say that there is no science fiction writer of Heinlein's stature active in the English language today. Asimov came close, but while he was a much-loved and much-respected figure, he never made the whole field resonate to each note he struck the way Heinlein did. One could make a case for Philip K. Dick, also dead. That leaves Arthur C.

Clarke, the poetic visionary of space travel, but a narrower talent than Heinlein. The difference is that when Clarke writes about space, we pay attention, but when Heinlein wrote about anything, we paid attention, even if only to violently disagree. Posterity may also work out whether or not a fiction writer matters more as a story-teller or as a thinker, but in the short run, a powerful, articulate thinker will always hold an audience. Everyone who read him cared what Heinlein thought.

In light of his importance, memorial activity for Heinlein has been surprisingly slight. There is a great need for a biography, and none seems forthcoming. We had a somewhat skimpy, posthumous collection of letters, *Grumbles from the Grave*. There has been no great upsurge in Heinlein scholarship.

No posthumous deluge of Heinlein's own work is to be expected. A writer as successful as Heinlein could surely sell his laundry list, but he was strong-willed enough (and has a sufficiently strong-willed widow) to suppress any pre-professional garbage-juvenilia or other such botches as have often sullied the posthumous reputations of other writers. (Remember the old joke: "Robert E. Howard dead is more prolific than Alfred Bester living.")

Nevertheless, I have three posthumous Heinleins on hand, a kind of collective Farewell to the Master:

*Requiem: New Collected Works by Robert A. Heinlein*  
Edited by Yoji Kondo  
Tor Books, 1992  
341 pp., \$21.95

*The Original Uncut Stranger in a Strange Land*  
By Robert A. Heinlein  
Ace/Putnam, 1992  
525 pp., \$24.95

*Tramp Royale*  
By Robert A. Heinlein  
Ace, 1992  
372 pp., \$18.95

The first of these is the most obvious sort of memorial, a collection of "previously uncollected" materials, plus tributes and memoirs from such colleagues as Poul Anderson, Arthur Clarke, Gordon Dickson, Jack Williamson, and so forth, plus a selection of speeches from the memorial service held at the National Air and Space Museum when Heinlein was awarded a posthumous Distinguished Service Medal.

The fiction is a little thin, the definition of "uncollected" being stretched a bit to include the novella "Destination Moon," which bears some resemblance to the movie of same title. Heinlein's version is better than the film, ending with a hint (probably too far-out for a "realistic" film of 1950) of alien colonies on the far side of the Moon. It's not Heinlein's best. The characterizations are flat, the prose so

## Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

spare in a typical post-Hemingway, slick-magazine style that it's often hard to tell who's talking. The story appeared in *Short Stories* (a pulp) and was anthologized at least once, and was then assembled by David Hartwell in a Gregg Press book, *Destination Moon*, along with the article "Shooting *Destination Moon*" (also included here).

Otherwise we have "Tenderfoot in Space," a prototypical juvenile serial from *Boy's Life* of the late '40s, and two mainstream stories from girls' magazines of the period, mostly of interest because of the author. The famous "Requiem" is reprinted, Heinlein's third published story, a quantum leap for the SF pulps of 1940, but now an example of fine writing delicately balanced between history and oblivion. It's the touching story of the millionaire space pioneer who has himself smuggled to the Moon and contentedly dies there. If the story means something to future generations, it will be for its evocation of the pioneering spirit. But Heinlein's down-and-out spacers who go bumming around the rural Midwest are really *barnstormers*. The temporal frame of reference is not even the 1940s, but the 1920s. If, for example, my niece, born last year, reads this story sometime in the first decade of the 21st century, is she going to understand it?

We also get four speeches, three of them Worldcon guest-of-honors. The 1941 one is the famous "timebinding" speech. That of 1961 is long, carefully reasoned, and political, a significant historical document.

Context: In 1959, the Heinleins were traveling in the Soviet Union. The Russians were very nice. Then Gary Powers got shot down in a U-2 spy plane. Suddenly the Russians were *not* nice. The Heinleins regarded themselves as lucky to have gotten home.

The 1961 speech is all about the menace of monolithic, invincible, super-human Communism. ("... it

may be more practical — more in accordance with the wishes of the authorities — for us to hold the 1981 convention in some garden city of the future located on the Arctic Ocean in the far north of Siberia. We can call it SlaveCon.") In retrospect, none of this is very convincing. Heinlein's audience was supposed to believe that "the Communists" so firmly believed in the rightness and morality of their cause, in the utter truth of what they read in *Pravda*, that they would never waver in their zealous mission to conquer the world. In other words, that they



lacked the fallibilities, foibles, and emotions of other human beings.

More context: George Scithers tells me that he talked to Heinlein about this speech at the 1961 convention. Heinlein's purpose was to scare his countrymen into continued resistance to Soviet totalitarianism. He didn't actually believe the Russians unflinching supermen, and surely he was too shrewd an observer to overlook the debilitating effects of corruption and cynicism; but he didn't want us to be complacent either.

Heinlein, like a lot of Cold Warriors, overshot the mark. For once, he was trapped in the perspective

of his time, unable to see even five years ahead. Because of such exaggerations, the "Red Menace" was soon something of a joke. Precisely when these scare tactics no longer convinced, protests against the Vietnam War became possible, and with them, the upheavals of what Heinlein's future-history chart had so presciently dubbed "the Crazy Years."

The 1976 speech was apparently ill-prepared. It's rambling, slight, and, we would now say, politically incorrect. The message: We are going to the stars; war is inevitable; a man's job is to defend the women and children. He was booed. Well, Heinlein never worried about being politically correct.

The tributes dwell on Heinlein's courtesy, his generosity and "nobility" (Gordon Dickson's word), and his greatness as a writer. Did you know that when Theodore Sturgeon suffered Writer's Block, Heinlein sent him a list of ideas, which he used for the rest of his life? Or that when Philip K. Dick was utterly broke, Heinlein bought him a typewriter? No, because Heinlein didn't brag about that sort of thing. Instead he wanted such kindnesses to be paid, not back, but *forward*, to someone else in equal need.

In this context, Spider Robinson's long, defensive tirade (reprinted from *New Destinies* of some years ago) is an embarrassment. Shrilly, Robinson defends every word Heinlein ever wrote, belittling those who dare suggest that, maybe, *I Will Fear No Evil* or *Time Enough for Love* wasn't up to snuff. He even makes the fatuous argument that these books were bestsellers, therefore they must be good. (By which logic Richard Shaver must be an important SF writer, and Raymond Palmer the greatest SF magazine editor of all time.)

Heinlein doesn't need this. Gee, Spider, even Shakespeare had his *Titus Andronicus*.

What we readers need is three stories: "My Object All Sublime," "Beyond Doubt," and "Pied Piper," all by Heinlein writing as Lyle Monroe in pre-World War II pulps, still never included in any Heinlein book. At a recent convention, I asked Dr. Kondo why this was so. He said that Heinlein regarded these stories as such dogs he didn't want them reprinted, and he (Kondo) decided to honor Heinlein's wishes.

I wish he hadn't, for completeness' sake. If those three stories are dogs, what are the two girls'-magazine stories but drowned kittens?

## Stranger

Next, a major event: the uncut *Stranger in a Strange Land*. It is fully 60,000 words longer than the original, which was severely abridged at the request of a nervous publisher back in 1960. After all, even a 160,000-word science fiction novel was extraordinary in those days, and *Stranger* was undeniably outrageous by the standards of the time.

My first impression in reading the new version is: it needs cutting.

Another reviewer suggested that the book is so badly dated that you just can't go home again. You'll never recapture the experience you had reading it the first time.

My own experience has been a bit different. I was too young when I read *Stranger* originally, about 14. I was reading the adult Heinleins, never having discovered the juveniles. My favorite in those days was *Orphans of the Sky*, still a pretty good choice. *Stranger*, I did not much like, or understand, or remember.

So, at 39, I have virtually no memory of this book to go back to. This is a relevant stance from which to review it. Many readers today, and in the future, are presumably going to read this book with only a vague idea of its

historical importance and no familiarity with the original.

Living literature, by definition, is that which retains meaning beyond its time.

What will the 1992 reader find? The first third is as brilliant as anything Heinlein ever wrote, a genuinely convincing depiction of a young man raised by aliens, whose thought-processes are disturbingly different from the Terrestrial norm. Valentine Michael Smith is the proverbial Man From Mars, that person to whom none of the "givens" of our society are obvious. If we have to explain everything we do, too often we dis-

self-caricature), an incredibly successful hackwriter, who also happens to be politically influential, a millionaire, a doctor, a lawyer, a fount of wisdom, and the master of a household of hangers-on, the female members of which jump to his command like trained poodles. There is much ado about the Fosterites, a televangelist sect that would make Jim Bakker and his ilk look like Cub Scouts. But ultimately the Fosterites have only a minor role in the novel. They are merely a conservative force, to be offended. It could just as well have been the Baptists. The Man From Mars goes off to found his own church, and much of this, and much of his own character development, takes place off-stage.

We are in even more serious trouble when Heinlein establishes that there is an afterlife, fully as corny as anything described in Mark Twain's religious satires ("Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," etc.). The book gains no virtue as fantasy. The sole effect is a lessening of reader concern for the outcome. Heinlein is too obviously pulling strings.

Even he seems to be getting bored by the end. Everybody chatters endlessly, in indistinguishable voices. The really important developments are reduced to hearsay. Mike the Martian is martyred, but it doesn't hurt because he's as chipper as ever in the hereafter a couple of pages later. *Stranger* was the first Heinlein blather book, of which *I Will Fear No Evil* was the most notorious later example. His justly-famous storytelling ability was beginning to fade. He had become preachy and self-indulgent, though in this case even the preachments don't really work, because the Martian "philosophy" depends on the absolute certainty of the afterlife. If it is truly impossible to kill anybody, then it seems okay for Mike to "disincorporate" anyone who gets in his way, since that is no more than putting them back



cover we can't. One of the characters gives a lovely definition of a prude: someone who thinks his standards of propriety are the natural laws of the universe.

With his central character the innocent stranger, Heinlein found the opportunities for satire, of course, irresistible.

Somewhere along the way, this book jumps the rails. It ceases to be a realistic science fiction novel about a human raised by aliens. As satire, it fails to focus. As soon as Valentine Michael meets Jubal Harshaw, we are in trouble. Jubal is an absurd wish-fulfillment character (and possibly authorial

to the beginning of the line, where they might learn to behave better next time. Otherwise, he's a presumptuous mass-murderer, whatever he believes himself to be — a somewhat more difficult moral position. Ambiguity and the possibility of monstrous delusion would have heightened dramatic tension considerably.

Jubal Harshaw almost redeems the book toward the end: lonely, feeling the weight of his years, his hangers-on lost to the Martian cult, he becomes a believable character, a disappointed father-figure now unable to control or understand his protégé. But by denying the possibility and pain of death, Heinlein robbed his story of its inherent power.

Had I been the editor, I would have demanded those afterlife sections be removed. I also might have referred Heinlein to Gore Vidal's *Messiah* (1954), a vastly better book about a future religion. The worst weakness of *Stranger* is that once Valentine Michael Smith becomes a savior, we see little of him and his personality goes flat. Vidal realized that it is virtually impossible to depict such a character — his *Messiah*, too, is hollow — and so focussed his attention on the dynamics of the followers, who cynically manipulate the new faith into something quite different from what the founder had in mind. *Messiah* remains firmly in the point of view of one disciple who is ultimately written out of the official history of the new faith. Vidal works out an elaborate theology and makes it very clear why people should accept his imagined cult. We have to take the sometimes interchangeable characters' word for it that Valentine Michael Smith's Martian teachings mean anything. And so *Stranger in a Strange Land* merely dissipates. It remains a historically important book, admirable in its attempt to be genuinely subversive and embrace ideas sharply different

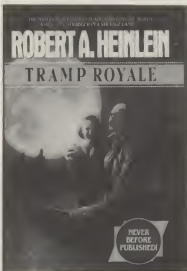
Books

from 20th-Century American norms, but ultimately I do not think it will be the book Heinlein is going to be — or should be — remembered for.

## Tramp Royale

*Tramp Royale* might be accused of barrel-scraping. It is an obsolete travel book, written after Heinlein's first trip around the world in 1954. He failed to sell it at the time, and the manuscript has remained in the files ever since.

But no, this is an entertaining, even fascinating volume, which,



because it is by Heinlein, is definitely worth publishing. It is as close to an autobiography as he ever got, and numerous passages illustrate his personality and thought. You might as well say that *Innocents Abroad* is an obsolete travel book. It is, but as a Mark Twain book, it's quite another matter.

The Heinleins went from Colorado Springs to New Orleans, through the Panama Canal to Peru, down to Chile, across the Andes to Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, then on to South Africa, Singapore, Java, Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii,

and back to Denver; much of this by sea, with numerous stops and encounters. Robert, as we already knew from such travel articles as appeared in *Expanded Universe*, observed a great deal. That what he describes here may no longer exist (a stable, democratic Chile, Peron's Argentina) only adds to the fascination. His analysis of apartheid is nearly as certain now as it was in 1954 to get his book banned in South Africa. (Heinlein saw apartheid as worse than slavery: the blacks have no freedom and the whites aren't even responsible for their upkeep.)

In the end he concludes that the United States is an even better country than he thought it was before leaving. Traveling at the height of the McCarthy hysteria, he heard of little else in foreign parts, but pointed out that by world standards, the McCarthy "terror" was mild indeed: no one shot, no one imprisoned or exiled; democratic institutions survived. Many of the sentiments prefigure those in 1961, but without the scare tactics. ("If we are to die as a nation, let us die proudly, with neither head in the sand nor led around by the nose, but calmly aware of our peril and fighting it with our utmost. There can be no safe course for us, but, if we deserve to win, we are more likely to win.") Of course in 1954, Stalin wasn't long dead, the Korean War was just over (sort of), and the world looked very different than it does today. The difference between *Tramp Royale* and that 1961 Worldcon speech is that while the speech requires historical perspective to be understood, *Tramp Royale* brings that perspective alive.

Ratings:

*Requiem*: ☆☆☆☆

*Uncut Stranger in a Strange Land*: ☆☆☆

*Tramp Royale*: ☆☆☆☆



## Noted:

*Yesterday*  
By Ray Bradbury.  
Capra Press, 1992  
240 pp., \$19.95

The subtitle, "Obvious Answers to Impossible Futures," tells us a good deal of what this intensely optimistic book is about. Those futures are only "impossible" to people who lack the vision to grasp them. Here we have Bradbury in

## The Collected FEGHOOT

Grendel Briarton

The adventures of  
Ferdinand Feghoot—  
122 of the most outrageous,  
pun-filled adventures  
you are ever likely to take



the manner of his best public speaking, writing at the top of his lungs, exhorting us to make the world a better place. Most of the essays are about architecture and urban design, ambitious scenarios for rebuilding cities into vast Disneylandish malls with block-long bookstores populated by robots, some of which, admittedly, sound a trifle naïve. Los Angeles was still smoldering as I read this. Are those people going to care about bookstores? I thought. But it's an intriguing, almost utopian vision.

The non-architectural pieces deal with science fiction, writing, travel, famous personalities Bradbury has met, etc.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Enterprising Women*  
By Camille Bacon-Smith

University of Pennsylvania  
Press, 1992  
338 pp., no price listed

Joanna Russ once acerbically remarked that while amateur *Star Trek* fiction may be of scant literary interest, as a sociological phenomenon it would definitely be worth some scholar's time.

Here we have a mass of raw data, somewhat turgidly written, but surely the definitive research on this area. It's all about women's media fandom, that vast underground of writing and publishing and reading, all by and for women, often overheated fantasies about the characters in such "source products" as *Star Trek*, *Blake's Seven*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and even *Starsky and Hutch*. The whole experience is even further removed from ordinary science fiction fandom than fandom is from the mundane world, an astonishing and slightly pathetic subculture within our midst that even most SF fans know very little about.

Thomas Disch's poem, "On Science Fiction" kept going through my head as I read this.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Imaginary Homelands*  
By Salman Rushdie  
Granta Books, 1992  
439 pp., \$12.50

Seventy-five essays, written between 1981 and 1991, on literature, politics, travel, the imagination, and diverse topics. Salman Rushdie is one of us, a writer of the fantastic, most comparable, I think, to James Branch Cabell, for all the ruckus over Cabell's *Jurgen* in 1919 was like a still pond on a windless day compared to the tempest over *The Satanic Verses*. All of Rushdie's novels have fantastic elements. I have reviewed two of them in previous columns. His "The Location of Brazil," about the Terry Gilliam film, shows a very fine under-

standing of the nature and uses of fantasy, as do some of the other comments on Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Italo Calvino, Apuleius, etc. "In Good Faith" defends and explains *The Satanic Verses*. "One Thousand Days in a Balloon" movingly describes the writer's plight of possible life-imprisonment because of what he has imagined. Read this.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*The Collected Feghoot*  
By Grendel Briarton  
Pulphouse Publishing, 1992  
188 pp., \$10.00

Here's a book long overdue, a third, expanded edition of the collected pun-filled adventures of Ferdinand Feghoot, time-traveller extraordinaire. The "Feghoot" is a literary form as distinct as the limerick, a short-short which builds up logically, devastatingly, to a hideous pun. Briarton, a.k.a. Reginald Bretnor, was the first and greatest master of this form. Who can ever forget his dread "furry with a syringe on top" ...?

With illustrations by Tim Kirk reprinted from the Mirage Press edition.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆



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## Genre Benders

### *Count Geiger's Blues*

By Michael Bishop

Tor, 1992

320 pp., \$19.95

Over the past several years, a number of "serious" SF authors have tackled the world of the comic-book superhero. Michael

what it means to become a superhero.

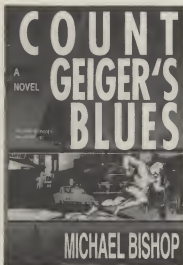
Unlike most such books, *Count Geiger's Blues* takes place in a world where superhero comics exist, a world pretty much our own. Xavier Thaxton, who becomes Count Geiger, is a most reluctant superhero. His transformation is particularly ironic since he's a high-minded art critic who despises "low" culture, and who often thinks of himself as a bridge to the Nietzschean Superman (never the DC comics version). He acquires his powers in as silly a way as most comic-book heroes do, from radiation acting like radiation never does. Once he's got the powers, and the caped suit, though, he proceeds to live up to them, fighting injustice and righting wrongs, until his own sense of duty leads to the tragic end of his career.

Since Xavier doesn't develop his powers until halfway through the book, the first half reads like a funny, perceptive mainstream novel about an art critic, his love life, and the barbarian teen-age nephew who comes to live with him. His first encounter with radiation leads to a disease later dubbed Philistine Syndrome, which is one of the funniest and cleverest elements in the book; though admittedly not realistic, it fits the ironic tone of the novel to that point.

For nearly everyone else in the novel, radiation acts as it does in our world, providing a chilling

counterpoint to Xavier's developing powers. The most horrific scene in the novel, as a result, is a happy child's birthday party. The radioactive waste that metamorphoses Xavier is, in another irony, one of the clues that help Count Geiger defeat the villain.

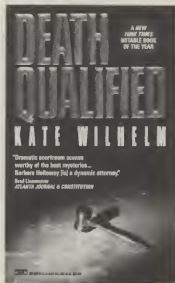
Xavier Thaxton starts out as a



Bishop's new book, *Count Geiger's Blues*, is a particularly successful approach to the subject, an exciting, witty, and moving look at

### Rating System

- ★★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★ Very Good
- ★★★ Good
- ★★ Fair
- ★ Poor



caricature, the pompous buffoon we all love to deflate, but as he turns into a comic-book character he paradoxically becomes more real, ending up believable and sympathetic. His nephew Mikhail, a lover of loud music and comic books, is also one-dimensional at first, for that is how his uncle sees him, but he, too, be-

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comes rounded. Xavier's girlfriend Bari is less well developed, seeming to be there only as an authorial device.

The novel is set in the imaginary southern city of Salonika, which is practically a character itself, and a fascinating one. Bishop depicts it in enough detail that I'd swear I could find my way around it if dumped there, and makes it engaging enough that I'd like to stay.

*Count Geiger's Blues* is ironic, wryly funny, and memorable. It manages the difficult feat of being simultaneously profound and entertaining.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2



### *Death Qualified*

By Kate Wilhelm  
Fawcett Crest, 1992  
438 pp., \$5.99

Kate Wilhelm is unpredictable, writing whatever she wants and never the same thing twice; perhaps that's why her career has never taken off as her talent would warrant. *Death Qualified* is written and marketed as a mystery, but it is most definitely science-fictional. It is also a remarkable novel.

The book has the feel of a crime novel rather than an SF novel; I couldn't isolate the ingredients

that identify its genre, but which one it belongs to primarily is clear. However, the SF element is essential to the mystery plot, to explaining what happened and, more important, why.

It's impossible to do justice to the plot without revealing information better left concealed. A disenchanted lawyer is called out of her self-imposed exile to defend a woman accused of murdering the husband she had not seen for seven years. The lawyer correctly guesses that the solution to the mystery lies in where the husband had been all that time, and that leads to a tale of chaos, hubris, and madness.

Wilhelm's main character, Barbara Holloway, is a delight: strong, believable, with convincing problems without being too neurotic, intelligent, human. And Wilhelm brings her vast talent to all of the characters; there are no cardboard cut-outs roaming the woods in which the story is set.

On the SF end, Wilhelm manages to deal with currently-faddish chaos theory, at least the fringes of it, without lecturing. This would clearly be essential in order to appeal to non-SF readers, but even for us it makes the novel stronger. The mystery plot is involved, detailed, logical, and for the most part believable. The novel's climax is rather Hollywoodish, and not everything the villains do makes sense, but you don't really notice that while reading the book.

*Death Qualified* is suspenseful enough to have kept me up very late finishing it. It is also flawlessly written, with living, human characters and a fine speculative center. Go brave the mystery shelves at the bookstore to find it.

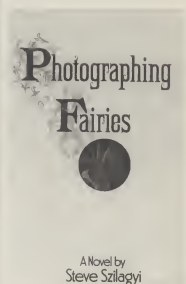
Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

### *Lifetime Employment*

By Floyd Kemske  
Catbird Press, 1992  
231 pp., \$19.95

Those of you who are fans of *Aboriginal's* Alien Publisher will be glad to learn that he has published his first novel, under the pseudonym of Floyd Kemske. *Lifetime Employment* is a satirical novel with science-fictional touches.

Growth Services, Inc., is a company with a policy of lifetime employment. As a result, the only way to get ahead is by killing a superior, and this fact has been institutionalized in the corporate culture. The protagonist, Gene, is a low-level manager who knows he will never move up because he can't bring himself to commit murder. However, a shake-up at



the top leaves him heading a department and embroiled in dangerous intrigues he's not equipped to understand, facing enemies he's not prepared to handle.

The book has to be regarded as a parody of corporate culture, rather than a realistic novel; neither the set-up nor the plot stands up to scrutiny. (For example, why don't any of the executives leave for another company where they might not have absolute job security but would not be in fear for their lives?) Through

flashbacks, we learn the painful origins of Growth Services and its lifetime-employment policy; the ridiculousness of responding to the policy's existence with systematic murder is a parody of the way large bureaucracies stick with established policy beyond all reason.

There are lots of satirical jabs in the novel, which is often very funny. Kemske rides some of the Alien Publisher's favorite hobby-horses, though not excessively. My favorite satirical element was the way managers regard "non-ex-empts" (clerical staff) as almost literally another species. Some elements strain belief too much, though, especially the car phones that call you constantly with sales pitches and which are illegal to turn off.

Character is not what's important to the satirical novel. We are supposed to empathize with Gene, though, but he's simply pathetic. He's almost completely passive, and on the rare occasions when he takes some decisive action, he generally does the wrong thing. Also, it would have been better to have a reason why he hasn't left the company to go somewhere where murder isn't required in order to get ahead.

*Lifetime Employment* is, on the whole, funny, well written, and never boring. You might add half a star if you work for a large corporation.

Rating: ☆☆☆

### *Photographing Fairies*

By Steve Szilagyi  
Ballantine, 1992  
321 pp., \$18.00

Steve Szilagyi is a mainstream author, and his first novel, *Photographing Fairies*, is being marketed accordingly. It is, however, most definitely a fantasy novel — in fact, literally a fairy tale.

The novel, set in Victorian England, takes off from reports of seeing real, live fairies (1920s

England's equivalent of UFO sightings). Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was so eager to believe in fairies that he was taken in by embarrassingly obviously faked photographs, makes a peripheral appearance, but he is not the center of the book. Rather, our narrator, whom we learn at the beginning is in jail awaiting execution for the crime of murder, is Charles Castle, an expatriate American photographer.

Castle's humdrum and not very successful life is interrupted one day by the appearance of a beligerent policeman who barges into Castle's darkroom to show him what appear to be genuine



photos of fairies. Castle's quest to determine the truth of the matter becomes an obsession and leads to his embroilment in the intrigues of a country village and, eventually, to an unjust conviction for murder.

The novel is written in a mannered style appropriate to the time in which it is set, and Szilagyi suffers no notable lapses from that voice. The novel works well, for the most part, veering from suspense to mysticism to bedroom farce to tragedy, without loss of control. The weakest part of the

plot involves two robbers who set upon Castle early in the novel and whose actions eventually lead to his conviction. It seems tacked on, and the robbers' involvement in the climactic scenes is difficult to justify. It would have been better for the tragedy to grow more clearly out of the situation with the fairies and Castle's fatal flaws: his passion for a minister's wife and his obsession with the fairies.

The historical style of the narration tends to distance the reader from the characters, but Castle is nonetheless interesting and sympathetic, though often too passive. The policeman's early conduct seems unduly hostile and violent even for his character as later revealed. However, the other characters are well handled. The difficulties they have in dealing with sex are of the age, and Szilagyi captures the Victorian mindset well.

*Photographing Fairies* contains some fine writing and unforgettable images. Despite the problems with the plot's resolution, it is a fascinating novel that will be of particular interest to those drawn to Victorian literature.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

### *The Best of the Rest 1990:*

#### *The Best Science Fiction and*

#### *Fantasy from the Small Press*

Edited by Stephen Pasechnik and Brian Youmans  
Edgewood Press (P.O. Box 264, Cambridge, MA 02238), 1992  
113 pp., \$8.00

A great deal of science fiction and fantasy is published by small presses, ranging from non-paying fanzines to semi-professional magazines with circulations in the thousands. However, this fiction is difficult to track down, because of lack of distribution. Stephen Pasechnik and Brian Youmans have put together this anthology of small-press SF and fantasy from 1990, and it is impressive.

These are by no means stories that were "not good enough" to be published professionally. Most are simply different enough in style or subject matter not to fit into the "mainstream" SF markets. Some were published in Canadian, Australian, or British publications and not seen here. The stories vary widely in style, theme, and subject, but not in quality: none is less than good, and some are excellent.

"Mirage Diver," by Australian author Terry Dowling, is an evocative fantasy of the Dreamtime Land. It is absorbing and well-written, if a bit obscure. (It might be less so were it read in context with other, related stories.) I wish an American publisher would take note of Dowling's talent and publish the collection from which this story is taken.

Carol Emshwiller consistently publishes remarkable, unconventional work that deserves a wider audience. Her "Peri" is a wonderful psychological fantasy where the boundaries between the dream and the real are unclear.

In "And They Shall Wander All Their Days," David Tansey creates an existential nightmare of space exploration, with surprising hope appearing at the end. "5 Cigarettes & 2 Snakes," by Geoffrey Maloney, shows us a highly unpleasant and creepy dystopia. It is cleverly written, and the final lines are chilling.

Matt Lowe's bizarre "Gooba-Gabba" is an alternate-history story about circus freaks. It can be hard to follow. "The Allah Stairs," by Jamil Nasir, is closer in feel to mainstream SF than most of the selections, a horrific parable. George Turner's "Generation Gap" is a well-done fable with a somewhat obvious point.

"Muffin Explains Teleology to the World at Large," by Canadian writer James Alan Gardner, is delightfully silly, as you might guess from the title, with a kick at the end. Garry Kilworth's "Truman Capote's Trilby: The

Facts," is funny and compact, taking off from the undeniable but inexplicable mystique of certain hats. (By the way, the American word for "trilby" is "fedora.") "Maleficent Morning," by R.A. Lafferty, is trademark Lafferty. Nothing more need be said. The editors have also included one poem, Ellen Kushner's wonderful "Sonata," about love's endings.

Edgewood Press is not exactly a large operation itself. It's well worth your while to acquire this volume, though, if you want to see what's going on at the edges of the genre.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆



### *Unwillingly to Earth*

By Pauline Ashwell

Tor, 1992

288 pp., \$3.99

*Unwillingly to Earth* is a book with an unusual history. The four stories included in this linked collection (it is not a novel, despite the marketing claims) originally appeared in *Astounding* — yes, *Astounding* — and *Analog*, over a period of some 30 years. Whatever their lineage, the stories are delightfully entertaining, with much of the feel of the better Hein-

lein juveniles.

Lizzie Lee (she doesn't use her full name, Lysistrata, which she understandably hates) is a teenager on a backwater, barely populated planet. After one of her frequent misadventures, she gets recruited, against her will, to go to a prestigious university on Earth to study Cultural Engineering. After she overcomes her culture shock, she has one adventure after another, and these comprise the rest of the book.

Lizzie Lee narrates in an unusual style, much like Damon Runyon's. It can be off-putting, and in fact I gave up on the book several pages in the first time I started to read it. But I picked it up again, and soon got used to the language. The style is not, in fact, irrelevant, as it reflects Lizzie's background and personality.

Often a school setting is an excuse for the author to lecture, but Ashwell generally resists the temptation; the one brief lecture we do get in the first part is actually important to the plot. The students of Cultural Engineering have to deal with issues of free will and the ethics of covert interference, but the dilemmas are portrayed through action rather than by talking heads.

The plots are nothing exceptional, but they provide plenty of rousing adventure. Occasionally the devices creak, as when Lizzie "forgets" something that would have lessened the suspense if the reader knew it; in general, though, Ashwell succeeds in distracting us so we don't notice the plot holes, which is the basic requirement for an adventure-story writer.

Lizzie Lee is an engaging character, and her universe is rich, with a detailed background this book has barely begun to explore. I'd like to see more of her, and more of Pauline Ashwell.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

*Labyrinth of Night*

By Allen Steele

Ace, 1992  
352 pp., \$4.99

Allen Steele's first novel, *Orbital Decay*, was published with a great deal of ballyhoo; I found it enjoyable and promising, but flawed. Now he's on his fourth novel, and I thought I'd check back in with the author Ace billed as a successor to Heinlein. The news is good. *Labyrinth of Night* is an entertaining near-future SF novel that is both more successful and more mature than *Orbital Decay*.

The story takes off from the premise that the notorious Face on Mars is in fact an alien artifact. The set-up is initially reminiscent of Algis Budrys's classic "Rogue Moon," as Steele gives us a mysterious and deadly alien labyrinth, but he uses this device very differently. We are witness to human attempts to solve the labyrinth, and to the vicious and deadly political maneuvering over what should be done with the alien relics. The main part of the book is a fast-paced political and psychological thriller. The ending is logical, appropriate, and sadly believable.

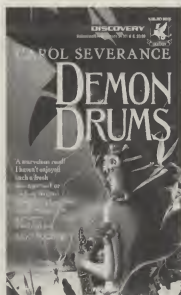
The story takes place in a believable near-future (2030s) world. Steele's portrayals of international power struggles in this multipolar future and the use of espionage techniques by private corporations ring true. I do wish Steele would give some indication that there will be any pop culture succeeding our own, but at least he's dropped the Grateful Dead obsession that plagued his first book.

The characters, even the minor ones, are well drawn and (when they're supposed to be) sympathetic. The protagonist of most of the book, spy August Nash, is likable enough, but for someone with as much espionage experience as he has, he displays too much incompetence, even letting a crucial discussion be overheard; it's understandable that the villain takes him for an amateur.

From the Bookshelf

That villain, L'Enfant, is paranoid and increasingly psychotic. The book would have been stronger had L'Enfant not been so crazy, but simply the representative of a sane, but dangerous, group at the Pentagon.

The novel suffers structurally because the main characters of the first section disappear for the rest of the novel. That first section, enjoyable in itself, turns out to serve merely as a set-up for the real plot. The action section near the end, involving death and der-



ring-do in an airship, moves well and is suspenseful, but for me it was the least successful part of the novel, tending to lose verisimilitude and bring us into Hollywood country. That should, perhaps, be taken as an indication of how good and credible most of the book is.

*Labyrinth of Night* combines speculation and suspense. Steele has given us an intriguing look at alien contact from an unusual angle.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Demon Drums*  
By Carol Severance  
Del Rey, 1992  
243 pp., \$3.99

Carol Severance's second novel is a lovely fantasy based on the beliefs and magic of Pacific Island people. *Demon Drums* combines this unusual choice for a mythos with outstanding texture and imagery to create a compelling novel, despite weaknesses in plot and structure.

Iuti Mano is a warrior who has laid down her arms and renounced her patron the shark-god because of a desperate need to find some peace on an island far away from the war. Unfortunately, the war comes to her, in the form of both armed men and evil sorcery, and she is soon on her way back to the mainland, accompanied by an untried but enthusiastic teenage girl. She soon discovers a dark and dangerous plot that must be stopped at all costs.

The plot is exciting but episodic; the action rises to a climax several times and then begins another story. Despite Severance's remarkable gift for invention (you will never forget the Demon Drummers), the outlines of the plot are predictable. There is one crucial revelation at the very end which I had figured out much earlier, and it was hard to understand why the characters hadn't.

Iuti Mano is a fine protagonist; though her motives and actions are obscure at first, the more we come to know her the more we understand. Severance builds the character beautifully, bringing in just as much history as we need to know. The teenage girl, Tarawe, is an enigma, her behavior sometimes baffling. The swordsman Risak whom Iuti rescues at one point isn't given much to do beyond following her adoringly. Some of the minor characters are unforgettable.

I usually don't care one way or the other about the presence of maps in a novel, but this book could have used them. The geography is important to understanding what's going on, and it was often unclear to me.

I seem to have spent most of my space on the book's flaws, perhaps because they are easier to enumerate than its strong virtues. A unique and beautifully drawn setting, a credible and sympathetic protagonist, an exciting plot, and some marvelous writing: all these are enough for me to recommend *Demon Drums*, and to watch for Severance's future work.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

#### *Resurrection*

By Katharine Kerr

Pulphouse, 1992

100 pp., \$65.00 leather,

\$35.00 hc, \$10.00 pb

Katharine Kerr's novella *Resurrection* is an odd tale, mixing SF, fantasy, and alternate worlds. The strangest alternate world to which Kerr introduces us, though, is the world of the brain-damaged, and her portrayal of it is wrenching.

Sometime in the near future, combat pilot Tiffany Owens is shot down and killed. Though medicine can bring her back to life, it can't prevent the brain damage that results from oxygen deprivation. As the story opens, Tiffany is making great progress at learning to "wire around" her dead neurons and coming close to being able to lead a normal life. But there are strange differences between her memories and the world she's in. The doctors tell her that her "false" memories are a result of the brain damage, but Tiffany isn't sure whether to believe that. Until the day she meets Satan and a dead rabbit.

Any experienced SF reader has figured out well before then that Tiffany has somehow moved into an alternate world from the one she remembers. Kerr's depiction of the results of the brain damage, though, make us understand how Tiffany can be unsure of the reality of anything she's experiencing. Eventually, of course, she is told just what has happened

and presented with a choice. The ending is predictable, but it still works.

Tiffany is a likable character, and we empathize with her and the decision she must make. I particularly enjoyed Kerr's non-clichéd portrayal of Satan in his

ancient role as the Adversary. The details given of both worlds make them solid and believable.

*Resurrection* is a worthy addition to Pulphouse's fine Axolotl line of original novellas. It is absorbing, sad, yet hopeful.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

□

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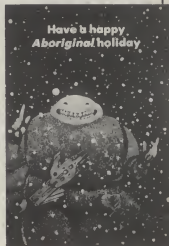
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Dear *Aboriginal SF*,  
*The purest and most thoughtful  
 minds are those which love colour  
 the most.*

—John Ruskin

*For frequent tears have run the  
 colours from my life.*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning

I have just received the Summer 1992 issue and am much saddened to see that *Aboriginal* has departed from its colored past. I hope that one day the color may return.

In the interim between current issues, I have been catching up on the back issues I have purchased. I count myself among the fortunate to have them all, as I have greatly enjoyed them. It has been interesting to see the progress *Aboriginal* has made from tabloid form to full-size paper magazine to colored slick and the regression to newsprint and now black and white. But the show must go on, even if the color is now found only in the stories themselves.

*Curse this recession to black  
 and white*

*which has washed the colors  
 from our sight.*

—Stanley Kong

Ann Arbor, Michigan

Dear Editor,

I notice that there are usually several poems in each issue of your magazine, but there is no mention in your obligatory column-of-small-print of payment or requirements for poetry submissions. I would like a copy of your writer's guidelines and an explanation of your payment rates for poetry. I enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Sincerely,

Jenny Langan

Kodiak, Alaska

P.S. I am a charter subscriber

to your magazine. Not once in all this time have I ever been disappointed by my decision. I always get far more than my money's worth. Keep up the good work!

*(We will consider science fiction poetry, or poetry about science, one to two pages (typed, double-spaced) in length. All poetry submissions must include a SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope). Payment is \$20 to \$25. — Ed.)*

To *Aboriginal Science Fiction*,

Please send me a copy of your writer's guidelines; enclosed is a SASE for that purpose.

Also, as a subscriber from your first issue, I wish to express my sorrow with the loss of your color illustrations. We do not see in black and white, and the use of color was one of your unique qualities, along with the excellent stories you publish. I understand the financial crush, however, and hope your truly excellent magazine survives long enough to thrive the way it should!

Sincerely,

Liz J. Andersen

Salem, Oregon

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I miss the color pictures, they were one reason I subscribed. But I like the double issues and that

there is one third more fiction to read. *(Twice as much in each issue, one-third more each year. — Ed.)*

I'm an optimist and hope the magazine will do well enough so we will get the color back. Keep the quarterly schedule, it gives me more time to read my favorite sci-fi mag.

Gregg B. Schuyler

Manchester, Connecticut

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I don't often write, except in protest, — BUT:

I like your magazine, for several reasons. The layout is good. I hate stories broken up and continued on pages throughout the magazine. Yours, I can usually just read, without the irritation of turning elsewhere.

Your stories are high quality. Very rarely do I finish one and not think "that was good!"

I have been impressed with what you're doing from my first issue. I don't mind the type paper you use, or black and white illustrations — I subscribe for the reading of it. And, I rather like the size, too.

You don't "garbage up" your magazine with cheap ads and those hateful little cards that fall out —

I've been reading *Science Fiction* for 35 years — so I know good, and what you all are turning out, is!

Since I also "struggle financially", I've decided to drop my various other *Science Fiction* subscriptions, and put my money in your magazine, exclusively.

Now, don't change, OK?

Sincerely,

Linda Gibbens

Aniak, AK

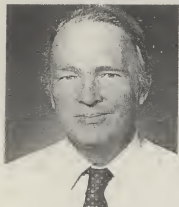
(Continued to page 115)

***Aboriginal SF* welcomes  
 letters to the editor.  
 Please feel free to offer  
 praise, criticism, or  
 helpful suggestions on  
 how we can make it an  
 even better magazine.**

# Unlikely Heroes

An obese pencil-pusher, a pair of forest critters, and ordinary crew members are some of the unconventional heroes that emerge in this issue.

Courage, cunning, good timing, and mounds of fatty flesh create a new super-hero in "The Secret Identity Diet" by Richard K. Lyon. Lyon got his writing start at the urging of his



Richard K. Lyon

wife Ina. When his first novel wouldn't sell he began a successful collaboration with Andy Offutt, and they produced four novels together, including *Demon in the Mirror* and *The Eyes of Sarsis*.



Larry Blamire

Lyon has a Harvard Ph.D. in physical chemistry and recently received a contract from the National Science Foundation to develop one of his inventions in the pollution-control technology field.

"The Secret Identity Diet" is illustrated by Larry Blamire. I was able to catch a performance of "Larry Blamire's Sketch-O-Rama" in Bever-



ER Stewart

ly, Massachusetts this summer. The eight clever sketches ranged from the subtly silly to the absurdly funny, including a group of people who arrive at the same place at the same time but can't figure out why, and an "impromptu" script reading that anticipates all the thoughts of the actors reading the lines. Cheers to Larry and Theater 9 for an evening of good, strange fun.



Lori Deitrick



In "Bag of Bones" by ER Stewart, a pair of creatures undertakes a dangerous quest. Stewart, who lists his education as "Lincolnesque, but shorter so far," saw his first short story published in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* in 1990. He recently completed "In Concert," a novella for the *War World* anthology being published by Baen, and an



Mark Canter

essay for *SF Review* titled "SF, UFOs and a Sense of Wonder."

Stewart is married to Susan Stewart, a USAF officer. They recently came home from Japan and added a third son to the family.



Peggy Ranson



Sharon Newman

"Bag of Bones" is illustrated by Lori Deltrick. She and artist husband David Deltrick were spending their summer producing paintings for WorldCon in Orlando.

The human spirit can prevail over the coldest depths of space, as we see in "Pictures from Home" by Mark Canter. This is Canter's first short story sale, although he is used to seeing his short non-fiction published. He is a contributing editor of *Men's Health* magazine. Canter has written several short stories and is working on his first novel. He is married to Margaret Canter, a nurse-midwife. Among the interesting things he's done lately are sit in an Apache helicopter flight simulator, in an M-1 tank simulator, and in the cockpit of a Russian chopper captured in Iraq.

"Pictures from Home" is illustrated by Peggy Ranson. When I spoke to her she was "sweltering in the New Orleans heat" and looking forward to Worldcon, where she was up for a Hugo in fan art. She is also negotiating some projects she "can't talk



Jon Foster

about" just yet.

In "Patterns of Little Gods" by Sharan Newman, human colonists try to break free of a pre-programmed existence. Newman has just sold a medieval mystery titled *Death Comes As Epiphany* to Tor and is working on two more. She is also excited about a 13th-century poem she has spent nine months translating from the Old French. It is an elaborate mythology/history that includes the legend of children turned into swans. She hopes to base a fantasy novel on the poem. These days, she is also trying to find time to read articles in four languages and work on her doctoral dissertation in history.

"Patterns of Little Gods" is illustrated by N. Taylor Blanchard, who just finished the cover for the young adult fantasy novel *Escape From Exile* (Houghton Mifflin) by Robert Levy. You can catch another sample of his work in the frontispiece for *Barrayar* (MBI-Easton Press) by Lois McMaster Bujold.

John W. Randal got the idea for



Anthony R. Lewis



Claudia O'Keefe

robotic dogs in a Western town and wrote the first draft of "Dead Sky Eyes" in one night. Randal is the author of the story "Dead Cows" in our last issue. He assures me he isn't fixated on dead things. "These are the only two stories with dead in the title," he says. Randal is collaborating on a novel with Pete Manison, a Writers of the Future finalist.

"Dead Sky Eyes" and this issue's cover are illustrated by Jon Foster. When I spoke to him, Foster was very excited about being chosen by Byron Preiss to illustrate volumes II and III of the *Neuromancer* graphic novel. Bruce Jensen did the first volume several years ago. Foster has quite a number of full-color paintings ahead of him.

The cover art was brought to the attention of Editor Charles C. Ryan by artist Bob Eggleton, which led to Foster getting several several assignments from the magazine.

If you are an Irish-American from Massachusetts like the protagonist in "The Curse," there are certain things



John W. Randal



N. Taylor Blanchard



Paul C. Schuytema

that you can't help wishing for, even if you know they are nearly impossible. "The Curse" is written by Anthony R. Lewis, a Massachusetts resident with a physics Ph.D. from MIT. Lewis says he got his start when "Ben Bova kicked my ass until I wrote the story I told him about."

His latest story, "Loss of Phase," is coming out in the anthology *What-Dunnit*, edited by Mike Resnick and Martin Greenberg (DAW). Lewis's hobbies include running SF conventions and doing SF bibliographic research.

"The Curse" is illustrated by Larry Blamire.

A society that's gotten carried away with recycling is the subject of "Cameo" by Claudia O'Keefe.

O'Keefe says she got her start at Clarion West in 1985 where she met Brian Thomsen, who introduced her work to Terry Carr. Her first sale, to Carr, followed: *Black Snow Days* for Ace Specials.

O'Keefe has written her second novel, *Carnal Angels*; she writes a column, "Writers Explain," for *Mid-*



Allison Fiona Hershey



E. H. Wong

*night Zoo*; and she's working on "putting together a trade paperback, anthology-style dark fantasy magazine called *Ghosttide* that will feature work by Hugh B. Cave, Susan Palwick, and David Smeds, among others."

"Cameo" is illustrated by Carol Heyer. Her latest children's book, *Rapunzel*, is just out from Ideals Publishing Corporation. The publisher went all out to promote the book at the American Booksellers Association convention in Anaheim in early June. Heyer had a large booth with a gigantic illuminated slide from her book at its center, and *Rapunzel* was featured on the cover of the company's catalog. Heyer's schedule included a photo session and a signing party. Ahh, the glamorous life.

A broken-down old man holds the precious secrets of a dying city in "The



John Gregory Betancourt



Ted Nolan

*Silver Abacus*" by Paul C. Schuytema. "The Silver Abacus" is the first two chapters of a novel in progress called *Abacus*. Schuytema recently completed a feature-length screenplay, "The Green Knight," and his stories "Ice Skimmer" and "Waiting for the Blinding Sun" were published in *Forbidden Lines* magazine last year.

Schuytema lives on a 100-year-old tobacco farm in the wilds of North Carolina with his wife Mary, a potter and teacher. He is finishing up a master's degree in fiction.

"The Silver Abacus" is illustrated by Allison Fiona Hershey. Hershey is the art director of a start-up software company and has illustrations appearing in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* and *Whole Earth Review*.

She is working on some SF short stories, several pictures for art shows, and an illustrated children's book "for little girls who've always wanted their own space ship." She says during the last California earthquake, she was driving home from a friend's house, it



Alan Gutierrez



Sean Williams

was still dark outside, and she watched the sky light up with arcing transformers. She thought UFOs were coming.

In "Rescue" by E.H. Wong, a space fleet commander faces a crucial test in the heat of all-out war. It is E.H. Wong's first professional sale ("Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."). He credits Marta Randall, who teaches a workshop in California, for giving him a major shove in the right direction. "I had to learn that writing financial investment articles in no way prepares one for writing fiction."

An electrical engineer by training, Wong helps support his wife Anne, an artist, and their two children by rehabilitating distressed real estate and managing low-income real estate.

"Rescue" is illustrated by David Deltrick.

Two rich brat brothers compete for Dad's attention in "Hunter's Pink" by John Gregory Betancourt. Betancourt's "Darkfishers" appeared in *Aboriginal's* issue No. 5 (July-Aug. 1987).

He is now working for Byron Preiss

Visual Publications, a book packager, and he just sold a fantasy novel he wrote in collaboration with Kevin J. Anderson. Betancourt has teamed up with *Aboriginal* editor Charles C. Ryan to create First Books, publishing limited editions of first novels by authors whose first short stories appeared in *Aboriginal SF*. So far the list includes the works of such rising stars as Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Robert A. Metzger, and Patricia Anthony.

"Hunter's Pink" is illustrated by Charles Lang. Lang has been hinting of a big project he was working on and I finally got him to spill the beans. He is painting a collector card set called "Zombie War" for FantaCo and Tundra companies. The 45-card edition and 51-card limited, signed edition tie into a two-issue comic series



Terry McGarry

about aliens who reanimate dead soldiers. Lang is painting the 5- by 7-inch originals for the 2 1/2- by 3 1/2-inch cards from pencil roughs provided by someone else. This October, anyone visiting Salem, Massachusetts, can see the entire series on display at the gallery O'Flaherty's.

A young woman of fighting spirit tries to cajole a race of aliens into defending itself in "Square Deal" by Ted Nolan. This is Nolan's first short story sale. He is the son of two English teachers, so "it just seemed natural to try writing."

The systems programmer/network manager from North Carolina has been working on a story about a network engineer and his mouse in St. Louis who suddenly find themselves on a galactic mission.

Alan Gutierrez illustrates "Square Deal." Gutierrez has done

**Aboriginal SF is now a quarterly publication.**

**The next issue will be out in late December. Ad deadline is Nov. 15.**

covers for publishers that include Berkley/Ace, Baen, Avon, and Tor, and magazines such as *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *Astronomy*. He is working on a cover for the winter 1992-93 *Amazing* and on a fully illustrated project about marine life for children called "The Oceanarium," published by Bantam Books.

"Light Bodies Falling" by Sean Williams brings a fleeing man from one universe into another with strange consequences. Williams won third prize in the Oct.-Dec. 1991 quarter of the Writers of the Future contest for his "Ghosts of the Fall." His story "Tour de Force" was due out in June 1992 in the Australian magazine *Aurealis*. That is the magazine where "Light Bodies Falling" first appeared. Williams lives in Australia, works in a specialist CD outlet, and is halfway through a bachelor of arts degree in music.

"Light Bodies Falling" is illustrated by Courtney Skinner. I spoke to him while he was in the midst of painting a 30- by 40-inch image of an itinerant sorceress that he had been carrying around in his head and that he hoped to finish for Worldcon. He said working in the large format with bristle brushes on canvas instead of his usual masonite or illustration board was an unfamiliar but pleasing experience.

"Having Seen These Marvels" is a poem by Terry McGarry, author of "For Fear of Little Men" in *Aboriginal* No. 26 (March-April 1991) and the poem "Imprinting" in *Aboriginal* No. 12 (March-April 1989).

McGarry's first novel, *Illumination*, received the Gryphon Award at WorldCon. Andre Norton sponsors the award for fantasy novels by female authors who are not yet established. McGarry also has a genie story coming out in December in the DAW anthology *Aladdin, Master of the Lamp*, edited by Mike Resnick and Martin Greenberg.

The second poem in this issue is by Darrell Schweitzer, *Aboriginal's* regular book columnist. Darrell is a co-editor of *Weird Tales*, along with George Scithers, among his many



Courtney Skinner

activities. He also regularly reviews SF for *The Boston Phoenix* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. □

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# Rescue

## By E. H. Wong

### Art by David Deitrick

Commander Henri Chang closed his eyes while he watched the white-haired Sun Tzu pace back and forth. The oversized sleeves of Sun Tzu's red silk gown trailed behind him like banners in the breeze.

"Would you repeat that again, Teacher?" Henri said.

In Henri's mind's eye, Sun Tzu sighed and rolled his eyes. With a shrill voice which was not really a voice, the old man said with thinly disguised irritation:

*All warfare is based on deception. Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity. When near, make it appear that you are far away; when far away, that you are near. Offer the enemy a bait to lure him; feign disorder and strike him.*

"Another lesson, sir?"

Henri opened his eyes and Sun Tzu vanished. Lieutenant Commander Winston Churchill "Smitty" Smith, his second-in-command of Fermi Base, waited at his office door. Henri beckoned him in.

"Lesson?" Henri said. "Another heavy dose of reproach is more like it. My implant has no use for the likes of me." After a pause, he said, "The feeling, I admit, is mutual."

Smitty raised his eyebrows. "How so?"

"The King of Wu once asked Sun Tzu to demonstrate troop maneuvers using his two favorite concubines as commanders. But when the two women treated the whole thing lightly, Sun Tzu had them beheaded, just to set an example." Henri shook his head. "Sun Tzu demands cold-blooded ruthlessness. That's not my idea of being a good soldier."

Smitty nodded. "Listen, you need to see this. They found survivors on Dirac Colony." He handed Henri a dispatch.

Henri tensed. Hesitantly, he took the list of names, the dispatch still smelling of fresh printing, until suddenly he froze. His eyes focused on "Tessica Chang" half-way down the list. Henri's heart pounded. He opened his mouth, somehow already dry, but could say nothing, his right hand now making small futile circles.

Smitty broke the silence. "Your daughter survived. The *Santa Maria* is bringing the survivors here. We just received this list on one of their burst transmissions between sub-space jumps."

Henri blurted, "What about Melinda? Wei?"

"Sorry, sir. I'm afraid there's no hope for your wife

or son. They've already combed the entire planet."

Henri stared vacantly into Smitty's face. He looked considerably older than the five years separating him from his lanky, red-headed executive officer. Wispy gray hairs had replaced what once had been a lush black head of hair, and his dark eyes seemed tired and war-weary. Gradually, Henri resumed his stoic command face, but his voice quavered. "Can we contact them?"

"Afraid not. They're using a pseudo random-walk through sub-space for evasion. It's still dangerous out there. All we know is when and where they'll arrive."

Henri took a deep breath and leaned forward in his seat. "Give me a report on the position of the Hissizz armada."

"They've just appeared on the deep space scans. Here, let me show you." Smitty stepped over to the real-time holo map that occupied one entire wall of Henri's office.

Located on the barely habitable planet Epsilon, the Confederation outpost of Fermi Base guarded the broad sector of space under Henri's jurisdiction. Outside, scorching winds blew down from jutting mountains, across barren plains, and howled over the heavily defended granite bunkers of Fermi Base. But inside Henri's office, only the hush of air circulators could be heard. Rather than maintaining a comfortable office like others of his rank, Henri endowed his office in a minimalism which mirrored the desolate planet: an austere cubicle in black and white, a single desk with two chairs, and a solitary window overlooking the spaceport. On the desk, Henri kept a recent family holo of Melinda holding their toddler son Wei while Henri stood behind six-year-old Tessie, resting one hand on her shoulder.

Henri followed Smitty to the map while his mind drifted. Tessie's alive, he thought. He felt a chill, tiny at first but then growing until it tingled his entire back. He shook it off, forcing himself to concentrate.

"...entire armada is here in a single group. Hmm, they've just changed directions, but it still appears to be a holding pattern. They're keeping their distance and skirting the range of our laser cannons. Luckily, we're out of their range, too."

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"Your assessment?" Henri said.

Smitty glanced at Henri, then turned back to the map. "I think they're sizing us up — looking for weaknesses — where they can pick us off one-by-one like they did at Pleiades 4." He waited until Henri nodded his approval. "As a group, they have overwhelming firepower."

"What about the rescue ship, the, uh ...?"

"The *Santa Maria*. They'll hide in the sub-space envelope as long as they can, right to the edge of our gravity fields." Smitty pointed. "They should materialize here —"

"Won't they come within range of the armada?" Henri demanded.

Smitty cocked his head, eyes widened. "The course change! We should have —"

Henri cut him off with a wave. "Launch status on our warships?"

Smitty swallowed, then stammered, "We're still at bare bones. Nine beta-class ships, four fully AI integrated and unmanned, the rest with human crews. Plus a couple of scouts. All ready to go, but not enough to defend the *Santa Maria*, though."

The two of them stood in silence, each staring at the map. So many factors, Henri thought. So much to lose. In his ear, Sun Tzu hissed, demanding attention. Henri turned inward to hear the shrill reminder: *All warfare is based on deception.*

Henri straightened his posture. "Launch three of the unmanned warships. Defensive phalanx."

Smitty looked perplexed. "But —"

"— and send them here," Henri continued. He pointed at Betax, the small moon circling the gas giant Omega, located on the opposite side of the Hissizz armada from where the *Santa Maria* would materialize.

"Oh, you want to decoy them away. We defend a worthless chunk of rock so they think it's strategic. I understand. I'll get on it right away." Smitty turned and hurried out.

Alone, Henri returned to his desk and sat down. After massaging his temples, he leaned back and stretched. He picked up the small family holo from his desk, smelling its faintly resinous odor as he turned the clear plastic disc from side to side, all the while averting his eyes from the three-dimensional picture in the center. Inexorably, though, the image drew him in. For a long time, he sat unmoving, listening to his own breathing, his chest tight as if it were clamped within a vise. Eventually, a single tear crept slowly down his cheek.

A buzzing tone sounded, and the image of a female ensign materialized within the viewscreen on his desk. "Sir, the *Santa Maria* just sent another coded transmission between jumps. Would you like to view it?"

He cleared a hoarseness from his throat. "Please."

The screen blurred with static, and then the

picture cleared. A woman officer with no-nonsense eyes, short clipped hair, and a uniform buttoned to the collar sat motionless, looking off camera. As if on cue, she turned forward and said in a tense voice, "This is Captain Acevedo of the *Santa Maria*. Thought you might like to see the debriefing tapes from the Dirac Colony survivors we picked up. Hold on ..."

After some more static, the first tape began. A dark-complexioned man blinked at the screen and squirmed uncomfortably. A plastiflesh patch covered half of his face and neck, and his scalp was reddened and hairless. He cleared his throat and said, "I'm Dr. Olivares of the geothermal team on Dirac. I was in the underground lab during the attack, which is probably why I'm still alive. I only heard one blast, one massive explosion." He shook his head and swallowed. "My guess is that they used that maser weapon we've all heard about."

Other survivors followed, telling their stories while the video showed the grim injuries they had received.

Finally, the tape that Henri had awaited came over the transmission. "Hi, Daddy." Henri held his breath and leaned forward. For a moment he couldn't recognize her, and then realized that like the other survivors, Tessie had suffered burns and had lost hair. She looked pitiful with her eyebrows gone. "I'm okay, Daddy. Captain Acevedo has been real nice and she's been taking care of me. She's going to bring me to you." She glanced down for a second and then looked back up. Tears filled her eyes. "I'm kinda scared, Daddy. But I'm trying to be a big girl like you always want. I'll see you and Mommy and Wei soon."

The transmission shifted to another of the survivors, but Henri heard none of it. He sat with his eyes closed, trying to contain the searing pain inside his chest.

After some time, a buzzing from his console broke the silence.

"What is it?" he snapped. His mouth tasted stale and parched.

The same female ensign appeared. "Sorry, sir. Just wanted you to know that the *Santa Maria* should be shifting out of sub-space in approximately one hour."

Henri sighed and gestured apologetically with both hands. "Thanks."

Henri got up, stumbling slightly. He gathered himself and entered the Command Center located just outside his cubicle. As he entered, a low-pitched hum of noise and the smell of hot insulation enveloped him, like being thrust into an underground geothermic tap. Various officers bustled about in the large circular area, all working toward the same purpose: to repel the Hissizz space armada before they destroyed Fermi Base and the two thousand

people there. Henri no longer lamented the irony of finally achieving First Contact only to meet a race of luminescent-skinned lizards bent on human genocide. Survival meant war.

And now these reptilian warmongers threatened to snatch away his daughter's reprieve.

Smitty came up and said, "Contingency plans for various Hissizz attacks are in place and ready."

"What about the decoy?" Henri said.

"Working on it now."

The large circular Command Center reminded Henri of a huge doughnut, with workstations and personnel distributed around the circumference. Bright panels lit the outer periphery, in stark contrast to the dark doughnut hole center where a vast real-time holo map of space twinkled. It covered the same area as the one in Henri's office, but on a greatly magnified scale. Smitty stood within the map, carefully scrutinizing one section, a leviathan among the cosmos. He beckoned Henri over.

"Our decoy ships took off some minutes ago. Here's the defensive phalanx." Smitty motioned at one group of three green lights, headed to the small moon Betax. Next, he pointed at a group of red lights and said, "The Hissizz armada. Look, the armada is headed in their direction to fight. Wait... only four ships are going. The rest aren't moving."

Henri could smell traces of ozone as he stood inside the laser-projected map. Smitty was right. Out of the perhaps eighteen Hissizz ships, only four moved in pursuit of the bait. The rest still hovered in the sector next to where the *Santa Maria* would appear shortly. The rescue ship would be easy prey, and Tessie along with it. He checked the time remaining.

Henri clenched his fists, and his stomach tightened. He didn't have the firepower to defend the *Santa Maria* and he couldn't contact them in sub-space to warn them.

He closed his eyes. Teacher, he thought, I need help with strategy. In his mind's eye, the wizened image of Sun Tzu appeared, dressed in a blue brocaded silk gown, his court-advisor finery. Sun Tzu smoothed his long white beard with one hand, cast a disparaging look at Henri, and intoned:

*Military tactics are like unto water; for water in its natural course runs away from high places and hastens downwards. So in war, the way is to avoid what is strong and to strike what is weak. Like water, taking the line of least resistance.*

Long ago, Smitty had bristled at how Sun Tzu presented his lessons from *The Art of War*. Gradually he came to accept the old man's advice as one point of view, invaluable as strategic input, but not as dogma.

"Smitty, reinforce the original three-ship phalanx over at Betax with another three. And after they've lifted off, let's send a single scout ship and the last

Rescue

unmanned beta-class warship over to Celestra." Henri pointed at the planet that orbited outside the orbit of Betax and Omega, its current position placing it equidistant from both Fermi Base and the alien armada. Smitty looked quizzically at him. "Assign separate trajectories so that it's not too obvious where they're going. Are the laser cannon batteries there still functioning?"

"Yes," said Smitty.

"Do you think the Hissizz detected those defenses?"

"I doubt it. They're well hidden, and since the armada entered our space from the other side, we never activated the Celestra lasers."

Henri allowed himself a small smile. "Well, then, let's see if we can give them a little surprise."

The second three Confederation ships launched from Fermi Base and headed on a direct line for Betax. After a delay, the four pursuing Hissizz warships slowed perceptibly, and then stopped.

"Ha! Cowards," Smitty cried. "Won't attack when the odds aren't in your favor, huh?"

Next, the Confederation scout ship and the single beta-class warship launched toward Celestra. The scout ship began a wild zig-zag course, pushing the inertial dampers to their limits, working in the general direction of the outer planet. The beta-class warship took a wide elliptical arc, designed to bring it to its destination at the same time as the scout.

Smitty frowned. "They've got battle computers, just like us. It won't be long before they analyze where the two ships are headed."

"I'm counting on it," Henri replied.

Sure enough, at that moment, the Hissizz responded. After some initial disarray, the entire remaining armada turned on a direct course, also toward Celestra.

"Look how fast they start, stop, and accelerate," Smitty said. "They must use inertial dampers, too, to quickly achieve sub-relativistic velocities. I think they're falling for it, though. How did you figure that?"

Henri moved within the holo chart to better watch the action. "If I were the Hissizz commander, I would have suspected Betax, also. But the last two ships taking devious routes to a lonely outpost means that there's something important out there. Something important enough to sneak two ships away to defend. In war, as Sun Tzu reminded me, you attack where the enemy is the weakest. And they think our weak point is Celestra."

Silence descended over the room as the Command Center personnel crowded around to watch the battle. Only the hum of equipment and an occasional cough could be heard. The group of red lights that represented the main Hissizz armada moved across the holo, crimson dots through inky black, like a candlelight procession through the night. One of the

officers estimated they would take twenty minutes to reach Celestra. The drone of the room weighed heavily and after a time, Henri's shirt clung wetly to his body. He stole another look at the time.

Smitty stood behind Washington, the artillery officer handling the laser cannons hidden on Celestra. "How soon, now?" he said.

"About five minutes before they're all within range," she said. "I'll fire the entire bank in parallel and rotate secondary targets in case they have automated retaliation systems. It'll up our kill percentage."

"At your discretion, then," Smitty said.

Henri breathed in shallow breaths, his eyes riveted to the bunched red lights. Would they detect the trap? But the Hissizz ships kept moving closer to their prey.

"Now!" Washington yelled and Celestra erupted in beams of white death, eerily quiet, pulsing almost too quickly to follow. The red lights blazed a brilliant white, then faded to black in a shower of sparks.

"Got 'em all!" Smitty cried. Pandemonium filled the room. "Oh no! They shot both of ours. Who was in the scout?" Someone leaned in to speak. "Who? Ruby Yashimoto? Dammit!" Smitty clenched his teeth and turned his back to the group.

The jubilation quieted as word of Ruby's death spread. Henri stepped forward and glanced at the original position of the enemy fleet and his throat caught. Hidden behind a planet and just coming into his view was one remaining red light; one last Hissizz ship had not moved. They were still in range! No time left! Tessie!

"Smitty," Henri shouted. "Quick. Get someone after —"

Too late. A green light winked on, signaling the arrival of the *Santa Maria*. He stared helplessly. Any second now, the Hissizz ship would shoot and he would be wrenched to pieces once again.

A tracer of white light beamed from the Hissizz ship. They had fired. A low scream caught in Henri's throat and the room blurred. But then he saw it. The green light still shone. The Hissizz shot had missed!

Quickly, the *Santa Maria* veered away, toward Fermi Base, toward safety. Henri's heart pounded. The Hissizz ship made a move to chase, but then turned in full retreat, accelerating on a bearing to join the four other now fleeing Hissizz ships.

Smitty shouted, "C'mon people. Five left. Let's head this one off. We've got work to do." Instantly, the Command Center filled with frenzied activity.

The young ensign signaled to Henri. "Call coming in for you, sir. It's Admiral Levi."

He breathed deeply, standing in a slump. "I'll take it in my office." Smitty could handle the remaining Hissizz.

Harriet Levi grinned at him from her office at Confederation HQ, halfway across the galactic arm.

"Excellent job, Henri. We watched the link-up of the battle from here. There'll be champagne toasts to you and your people in Geneva tonight ... for the first time in a long time," she added wryly. Her smile abruptly vanished and her voice softened. "By the way, my deepest sympathies about your family."

Henri acknowledged her with a grim nod.

"Are you getting along any better with your advisor implant?" she said.

He smiled weakly, then shrugged.

She studied him for a moment before continuing. "We just finished a tactical assessment of the Hissizz. From a technological standpoint, they aren't very different from the Human Confederation, both in their weaponry and their stardrive capabilities. With the exception of their maser, which seems to be used primarily against civilian populations, we're two almost equal sides."

"This is going to be a long war, isn't it?"

She sighed, allowing Henri to notice for the first time the additional creases pulling at the corners of her mouth and eyes, lines that had not been there the last time they met in person. "Did any of the Hissizz ships fire a drone at your base?" she said.

"No, why?"

"Biologicals." Harriet grimaced. "They hit Planck Station with a re-engineered virus that manufactured a deadly nerve toxin. Fatality rate exceeded 60%. And following a skirmish on Gagarin Base, a protein disintegrating contagion broke out days afterwards. Our quarantines didn't hold. We lost everyone. Before they died, though, the base doctors identified oxygen as a catalyst that triggered the contagion, which causes the victims to decompose from the outside in." She shuddered, then took a deep breath. "Wholesale depilation. Then massive skin lesions burning inward like acid. It was horrible, Henri." Harriet's face looked bleak. "They intend to completely eradicate us, not just to conquer and dominate. Be careful," she added before signing off.

On his office map, one pinpoint of red light abruptly flared white, followed shortly by two more. The final two Hissizz ships were fleeing the system with a number of Confederation ships in pursuit. Smitty wasn't wasting any time.

Henri walked to the window, looked across the space-port to the craggy granite mountains in the distance, and then glanced upwards. Somewhere above him, Tessie's ship orbited in a reentry vector. He leaned his forehead against the window. Oh, Tessie. There's no more Mom, there's no more Wei. It's just you and me now.

After several long minutes, he stirred and returned to his desk. Something still itched at the back of his mind, like a scratchy woolen sweater that gradually becomes intolerable. Perhaps he felt the post-adrenaline depression from the space battle —

but no, something seemed amiss.

Henri closed his eyes and accessed Sun Tzu. The venerable strategist sat on a small wooden barrel, a gnarled walking stick across his lap. He acknowledged Henri with a curt bow but then brushed him off with a wave. He sat silently, brooding. At last, Sun Tzu held up a warning finger and spoke:

*Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.*

Henri tipped his head to one side. Teacher cautioned against perils, warning about danger. But what had he overlooked?

*Know the enemy and know yourself*, Henri softly repeated. The enemy? The Hissizz were blood-thirsty Huns. They wanted a universe free of humankind and would resort to any means possible. Henri tapped his fingers on his desk, drumming uneasily. What about himself? He shook his head; this could take forever. Maybe Sun Tzu meant for him to understand his weaknesses. His grief might be a weakness. Henri couldn't see how it fit, though. No, it had to relate to the *Santa Maria* and Tessie. Did his love for his daughter make him blind?

Suddenly, an icy chill slid through his chest. The earlier words of Sun Tzu came back, like taunting jeers: *All warfare is based on deception*. He sat frozen for a moment, not breathing, his eyes clenched shut. With a trembling hand, he slowly reached forward and tapped a button on the desk.

The young ensign reappeared. "Yes sir?"

"Raise the *Santa Maria* for me." His voice didn't sound like his own.

"They're in final descent so the reentry corona will be charging. The link might break up, sir."

His screen filled with static, then partially cleared. A snowy image of Captain Acevedo appeared. "Acevedo here." Henri could barely make out her voice amid all the static.

"Commander Chang on this end. This is important. I need to know if you've suffered any recent hair loss or skin problems."

"What?" She didn't suppress the irritation in her voice. "Can't this wait?"

"No! That's an order, Captain!"

Captain Acevedo visibly stiffened. After a brief hesitation, she lifted a hand to her face, rubbed her eyebrow, and showed Henri a smudged finger. "Make-up. It's ghastly but my eyebrows rubbed off yesterday. They're still sore. And just today, I've begun to lose a lot of hair. I must've been exposed to residual radiation at Dirac when we landed. We'll undergo a standard quarantine when we land, though, just as a precaution."

Henri's stomach tensed. "What about the sur-  
Rescue

vivors — skin and hair problems, I mean?"

Acevedo replied, "Lots of it, sir. Everyone. Bad skin rashes and hair loss." The static increased.

"One last question. Were you on Dirac Colony when the enemy hit?"

Barely understandable now. "No sir. Nowhere near. Say wh ... this all ..."

The picture blanked to just static and then the ensign came back onto the screen.

"Sorry, sir. We lost them. The corona will discharge when they land and you'll be able to talk to them again. They'll dock in about eight minutes."

The ensign spoke her final sentence to an empty chair. Henri was already rushing through the door. "Washington," he cried, halfway into the room.

She spun in her seat. "Yes sir?"

"Are the base lasers ready to fire?"

She peeked at her control panel. "Ready, sir."

He tried to keep his voice steady. "Target and lock-in on the *Santa Maria*."

The hubbub ceased. Apprehension rippled through the room, and every face turned to look at him. Smitty stepped forward, his mouth open.

Henri closed his eyes momentarily, catching a glimpse of an ecstatic Sun Tzu. His stomach heaved. But Henri fought to control himself as two thousand lives still hung in the balance. Inside, he felt a numbing cold and he wanted to scream, but he managed to force the words: "Smitty, the Dirac survivors were deliberately spared — *twice*. They've been infected with the Gagarin Base contagion, a protein disintegrator. Hair and skin goes first." He choked. "Quarantines won't hold it. If they land, everyone here dies, too."

A look of horror spread over Smitty's face. "Tessie?" he said.

Henri had to turn away. He looked up, pictured his wife, and whispered, *Melinda, forgive me*. Out loud, he said, "She's already dead." After a long pause, Henri pointed at Washington. "Fire." □

## Moving?

If you plan to move between now and December, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

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# Cameo

## By Claudia O'Keefe

### Art by Carol Heyer

Waste. Thirty years before Leticia Isaacs ever came to live at Autumn's Reach, no one was trying to recycle everything you owned. Not everything. Not before you could even get the honest usage out of it.

Letty sat in her wheelchair by the street side windows, drooling onto the video birthday card the nurse had laid across her knees, atop a nest of greyed bras. She tried wiping off the saltine-thin screen with the wad of toilet paper she'd brought from her room, but the tissue was already too wet from holding it to her mouth. On the front of the card, her granddaughter and family sang to Letty in party hats from behind smears of saliva.

The drooling had begun three days after her one-hundred-and-twelfth birthday. It was embarrassing. She couldn't figure out why it was happening. No one would tell her, and it wouldn't stop.

Hers was fourth in a row of wheelchairs and their elderly inhabitants, stretching from the west conservatory entrance of Autumn's Reach to the hospital elevators, perhaps seventy-five yards away. There were hundreds of wheelchairs inside the greenhouse-like structure, perhaps four hundred, four-fifty. And nearly the same numbers in the southern and northern conservatories.

On Letty's right, a silver-haired woman sat as erect and still as possible. She wore an expectant look, a double choker of pearls, black patent heels too big for her wasted feet, and a diaper under her nursing home snapsuit. To her left, a man with specks of food dried to his chair pointed at something outside that Letty couldn't see. The wave of his arm drove rotting spaghetti sauce odors toward her, along with the old man's goaty musk.

For all the crowd, it was startlingly quiet, the inertia an ominous force. No music. No talking. No newspapers clicking. Together with these people, Letty sat patiently waiting.

She knew none of their names. She knew no one's name here, though she suspected she might have been told some of them many times. She knew what she waited for, however. It was the same thing they were all waiting for. She knew, because she had pressed her thumb to some documents in order that it might happen. Lately, though, she couldn't remember the specifics. There was more to it, but what it amounted to were visitors. Someone to visit her. Just her and her alone. The man, and that

woman with the machines. If she couldn't have a visitor who belonged to her, one of her family, the man and the woman who came to test everyone daily had to suffice. They would spend a little bit of their time on her, just her, every day.

Her birthday card fell to the floor, and she wadded the clump of bras close to her body.

*Recycle. Recycle. Recycle.* That's all people cared about. That's all they talked about with her. Everything had to be reused. It was a crime, they told her, to waste things. Bed sheets and exhaust from the ovens in the kitchens. Ceramics in any plates that might be broken or chipped. Every inch, every shred of plastic or paper or foil she came into contact with. The spit water that flowed down her sink when she brushed her teeth, and the diapers they dressed her in as well each morning. Books she let lie around for too long and the mashed potatoes and banana she wasn't fast enough to finish at lunch. Even the wood and cotton stuffing in the two easy chairs she and her husband used to lounge in side by side, but which had stood in storage one month too long.

And now her bras.

*Recycle, Mrs. Isaacs. Recycle so someone else can have things, too.*

She was a law-breaker. They had told her so.

"I'm sick of it. I won't do it," Letty said, as she spied both her granddaughter, Susan, and an orderly from the nursing station approaching.

"Gram?" Susan said. She was a youthful haze drifting into Letty's rapidly deteriorating vision. "Gram? It's Susan."

"Thirty years ago no one was trying to recycle my goddamned bras!"

"Gram ..." Susan came close enough for Letty to distinguish facial features. She looked pained. God, how Letty was fed up with the inbred stoicism her granddaughter wore. Pity and Letty's reflected misery and Susan's own exasperation all mixed up, an arrogant rouge blended into hard, white cheeks. Hers was a rhetorical expression, the question unanswerable: *How can I possibly get stupid old Gram to understand?*

"You see," the orderly said to Susan in his sneaky voice, the one that sounded so calm and level-headed to outsiders. "She won't give them up. We asked her to put them in the bin earlier, and now she's got it





into her head that we're trying to steal them away."

Susan bent over to talk to Letty.

"She doesn't have to, but they're not very sanitary."

Susan nodded impatiently at the orderly's explanation.

"Hi, Gram, how are you feeling today?"

Letty shrugged.

"Ray and Marion called me today, asking how you were doing. I told them you were coming along well in your ..." she paused to brush away a drop of sweat running down her face, like condensation on a glass of milk. "... *monitoring program*."

"Then you don't know what a liar you are."

"Letty! I wasn't lying. You were fine on Tuesday. Now what's this about your bras? You don't really need them anymore. Not really. They don't fit any longer, do they? It's better to give them to the man." She took a healthy grip on the bras in Letty's hands. Pleading. "Give them to the man."

"Oh, you! You don't know how much I need them. I can't look right without them. I won't leave this room without them!"

"For heaven's sake, Gram, your boobs are in your lap. There's no bra I know of that's going to reach that far."

That stung. That stung Letty badly. One part of her recoiled from her granddaughter. One part wanted to look away and not look back. But something else had control of her these days. An alien persona that had hold of her vocal cords and forced her lips to move ways she didn't want them to. An entity for whom she possessed faint signals of recognition, but to whom she couldn't supply a name. Almost as if this person didn't exist. Wasn't real. Imaginary. Made up from bits and pieces of herself that had become separated and started to float around inside her, like a case of detached retina.

The pieces came together for a minute and were violent.

"You!"

Her hands attacked Susan. She was helpless when they grabbed at her granddaughter's hands and started scratching them, *hard*. Again and again. Surprising Susan, and appalling her. Hard enough to draw blood before the young woman could finally bring herself to react.

"Those are my bras!" Letty said. "*Mine*. I won't let you take them."

"I won't," Susan said. She stood, backed up and turned away. Looked back only once. Very briefly.

Letty watched her only link with the outside world walk away from her toward the parking lot, and wondered why, *why*, her voice had been so mean to Susan. Why had she done that? How could she have clawed at her granddaughter?

"It's simply part of the process," the woman with

the machines told Susan, when the two of them visited Letty together. Susan and Machine Lady were whispering off to the side, keeping things from her, but Letty's hearing was still quite excellent.

"Process?" Susan asked.

Process? She knew it. Letty knew it. They were doing things to her. Though she was strapped into her wheelchair, she flipped up the footrests and began shuffling in her slipped feet, pulling her way towards the front door, dragging the wheelchair down the corridor inches at a time by her toes. They had her prisoner and they were doing the process on her. She wanted to go home, back to the house on Sanborn Avenue where she had lived with her husband, Johnny, since 1948. She was going to find her way back to her house.

*Please take me home*, she thought.

"Part of the dementia," Machine Lady said to Susan. "Increasing portions of her brain are becoming infarcted. With them are going many of her learned responses and control over her behavior."

"Is she ... she ..."

"Still with us?" Machine Lady said. "Yes, I believe so. If I thought otherwise, she would already have been struck from the program. Actually, the prospects for her to make it through to the final stage are very good. Yes, there has been a lot of cell loss, and some structural damage, which you might suppose would not be good, considering what we're trying to attempt with her ..."

Letty looked up as she grabbed for the counter at the nurses' station, pulling herself farther toward freedom. She couldn't see Susan's face, but her granddaughter was shaking her head. What did it mean? Was she unhappy with her Gram? Was she going to do something to her because she was infarcted?

"It's good, actually," Machine Lady said. "We're looking for patients with enough structural loss to satisfy the parameters of the program. And Leticia is almost there."

"It's simply that there are several parts of her brain that aren't communicating with each other any more. Most of her older memories are intact. She just can't access the present, or if she can, her decreased faculties don't know what to do with it."

"I don't know," Susan said. "Is this what she wanted? I wasn't here when she signed those papers."

Machine Lady tried to soothe her granddaughter. "Oh. No. No. Please don't feel anxious about this. None of the implants are affecting her in any way. They're there only to monitor her progress. We have to know when the structural loss has reached the appropriate level. Please. Don't feel badly."

Letty grabbed Machine Lady's skirt to pull on next.

Machine Lady turned around and put her hand

over Letty's to pry loose the fingers grasping at her clothing.

"I want out of here!" Letty said. "Why won't you let me go out?" She clutched the woman's side with her other hand and dug the fingers in hard.

"Gram, let go of the lady." Susan gave a nervous laugh and rushed at Letty. She added her efforts to the struggle.

Susan within range, Letty immediately forgot about Machine Lady and lashed out at her granddaughter. She hit Susan in the face when she knelt to talk.

Meaning to trick her into recycling her tissues, probably. Give away everything.

Susan jumped up and back. Touched her face where Letty had struck her. "Gram!" Then quieter. "Why do you want to hurt me?"

"Phew on you!" Letty said. "You're going to recycle me."

"It's simply part of the process. Remember. The process. It's not her."

"Process," Letty said. "Process you."

Machine Lady slipped in close to Letty and gave her a shot in the upper arm with the dosage gun she kept in her left hand. Letty looked up into Machine Lady's peach-colored face. The woman bent over to speak to Letty at her level. She had freshly dyed cheeks, a golden-hued pink that at once looked natural, but wasn't. It was more than natural. It was more than any girl ever thought of doing in her day.

"You think you're all the rage," Letty said. She thought about whacking at Machine Lady, but the woman's eyes were glittering too much, were too self-motivated for her to even stand looking at them. They scared her. Besides, Letty's rage, her anxiety, were all suddenly fading away.

"You remember what we talked about yesterday, don't you, Letty?" Machine Lady asked. "You remember what you wanted, what you signed up for?"

No, Letty thought desperately. No. She wasn't sure what she was thinking anymore. Only ... No.

"I want out," she said. "I want out of here."

"No you don't. You told me to remind you when-ever you forgot."

"Don't you remember, Gram?" Susan asked. "Last Friday, you asked her to remind you."

*I didn't. No, I couldn't.*

"Now I'm going to take your readings for today, honey," Machine Lady said, and parted the thinning white hair on Letty's head, smoothed sections of it back and away, softly, methodically, all to insert her machines under the scalp behind the left and right ears, two others at the base of her skull, one on her crown, and another above what remained of her bangs. Instead of camouflaging them beneath the fuller spots, the jacks had been placed where she

was balding the most.

Soon. Quite soon, I'd say," Machine Lady said, when she removed her machines from Letty's sockets on another day. The woman turned to the man who always came along with her. They rarely discussed their findings in front of Letty.

"What?" Letty said.

"And I think we should cut back on the meds. To ten milligrams twice a day. I don't want to risk a heart attack at this point. We could cold load her, but I hate having to reconfigure at the last minute. It's wasteful and clumsy, and the integration always picks up more flaws than it's worth.

"Oh, and Ken, when they do that, tell them they better secure her better in this chair. And they'll probably have to put mitts on her, too. The seizures could get fairly aggressive."

"What?" Letty said.

"Will do," Ken said.

"Here." Machine Lady pressed a button on her computer, and the leads that had been connected to the sockets in Letty's skull retracted like several old-fashioned tape measures. Its crystal drive spit out a garnet-colored lozenge. She handed it to Ken. "Add this to the other two scans you're taking to the lab. Tell them to start on hers first."

"What?" Letty said.

"Nothing to worry about, dear." Machine Lady gave Letty's arm a well-gauged squeeze and pat. "Why don't you go out on the patio and enjoy the sun? It's less muggy today."

"What?" Letty said as the pair moved on to the next room.

Letty's room housed several other women patients besides herself. Draped heaps on the beds. Bodies sighing in the humid little room. Bones shifting in shallow, cotton graves. Occasionally, a startled face would pop up out of some sheets, a mute inhabitant staring about in bewilderment, as if just remembering something very important. Whenever this happened, the person would study each nearby object carefully for clues to what she was trying to remember, then eventually succumb to the unsteady gravities of age, disappearing from view in a set of tiny jerks. One more sigh that Letty heard, and wondered if it had been hers.

She would lie awake thinking and sleep for hours, never sure which activity she had been doing longer, what time, or what day it was, what year, where she was. But her mind tried to wonder things. It wondered if Susan was ever going to come back. It wondered what it had been thinking before. It kept things from her. And she'd wonder harder, but the pictures it gave her fell out of focus and the words it said were in languages no one could translate for her. When she tried to remember the ocean bun-

galow where she had lived for eighty years, to picture her dying husband's confused eyes staring at her on the morning of his embolism, the ingredients for his favorite snowpea salad, so she could make it before he got home ... after a while her mind would give up on her. She wasn't worth its effort anymore.

*"... yet how could he not touch her? How could he not want to crush her to him? Smooth away her fears about the man on the docks."*

"Huh?" Letty's head bobbed up. She couldn't focus her eyes correctly. A young woman sat in shadow across from her, that much she knew, but she was unable to identify her.

"It's chapter four of that romance, Gram. I've been reading to you."

"Oh." Hesitation. "Where's ..."

*Something I saved up to say. There's something I have to remember to say.*

"What, Gram? What do you need?"

*I have to tell Susan I love her.*

"Are you all right, Gram?"

"I've have to ..." She couldn't make her talker talk right.

"What? I didn't hear you."

Hopelessness. "I don't know."

"Mrs. Isaacs?" A man speaking. "Mrs. Isaacs, can you hear me? Mrs. Isaacs? Mrs. Isaacs. Missus Isaacs."

A storm of psychic memorabilia exploded in her brain, then caught fire and completely consumed itself, leaving ...

Jarring and wheels and black bag darkness constricting around her face. Terror.

"Don't be afraid," they whispered. "Don't be afraid."

"What?" she said, hoping to figure out if they were close, so she could grab onto one of them. "I feel so afraid."

"Don't be."

"But, I'm so ..."

Then glaring white. Noise suddenly assaulting her. She saw distinct shapes and moving forms but couldn't comprehend them at first. She sat up and began to cry.

"Happy birthday, Miss Isaacs," a doctor said to her. "Happy birthday," said the physician's attendants and technicians crowding around the operating table on which she sat.

"I don't know why I'm crying," she said to them.

"Don't worry," said the doctor, "it's all part of the birthing process. There's nothing to fear. It only proves that your new body is working properly. Give yourself a moment to adjust."

*New body?*

Yes, she felt different than she knew she should.

Taller, straight-backed, heavier and yet more buoyant, thicker in some places, thinner in others, her weight distributed wrongly, or rather with uncustomary emphasis. She sensed the internal currents of blood and nerve inside her, and yet, comparing them to memory, she found them disorienting. The rhythms of lung and heart against her ribcage were not familiar. The parts of any body which were normally very sensitive, fingers, lips, were not supplying her with the range of sensation she had come to expect after more than a century of life.

Then she became aware of the machines. Both her arms and hands were packed with devices, biomimicking hybrids, tools with inorganic cell structures designed to perform a variety of functions with computer speed and precision, everything housed beneath real skin, set into wells or cavities in her very real bone and muscle.

Real, but not real.

Human, but not.

Hysteria shot through her. *Machine Lady. I've become like Machine Lady.*

"I don't feel right."

"That's to be expected," the doctor said. "Until your old memories of proper body awareness are ferreted out by the new prosthetic half of your mind, and altered to a more accommodating standard, you'll continue to feel out of sorts, a bit awkward."

"Come look."

He reached out, and the hand that rose to take his, her hand, was a deep brown-red, too intense a color to be a natural skin tone. She slid to the edge of the table, and stood with his assistance. As the technicians moved aside for her, they opened her view to a second operating table, parallel to hers.

On the table lay a dead old woman with mouth and eyes open. Age had twisted the woman's spine and limbs into a permanent, near fetal position, reminding her of the contents in a fossilized egg.

"There I am," she said, and then, strangely, something in her refused the identification.

"No." The doctor guided her to a full-length mirror and positioned her in front of it. "There."

She gazed at herself, but did not gasp. She had known the exact shade of creamy brown-pink her hair would be, become acquainted with the light pink irises in the eyes staring back at her, all before she had even looked at them. As if she had been observing them in mirrors for a decade. They had programmed the memory into her, and other things as well.

"You'll find that New Persons get to eat food quite similar in taste and texture to the types you've eaten all your life. And you can see that you are capable of crying. Every other human biological function has its analog, except that you won't need to void as often. And unfortunately, sex may not be as satisfy-

ing as you might like."

She glanced over at the other operating table again. Grew confused. But the doctor anticipated her anxiety. He responded in a bored voice.

"Most New Men and Women find that they want different names after they're born. They find that they aren't comfortable with their old identities anymore. No one says you can't still be Letty, if you wish, however."

Frowning, she turned her back on the old woman, then met the doctor's indifferent gaze.

"Cameo," she said. "My name is Cameo."

**T**hey dressed her in a khaki jumpsuit, made from recycled fibers, and gave her I.D. bearing the name Nw. Cameo Isaacs. Then they put her on a shuttle off-planet to a waiting flight to Mars. There she would live and work in a colony with other New Men and Women. She would have a choice of assignments, they told her.

Her new duties to the Mars colony were centered in her mind, were akin to feelings in the psychological impact they made on her, compelling, like extra emotions bearing equal weight with love, hate, envy and desire. She couldn't say she was happy. Nor was she precisely unhappy.

"Happy birthday, Cameo." A New Man she instantaneously recognized as her superior reached for the seat back in front of her. He floated in the aisle beside her. "Belated birthday, that is." His words continued in her head without his lips

moving. He smiled, while his mind accessed and talked to hers. It surprised and alarmed her that he hadn't asked permission before invading her thoughts. "You going to be a good little workhorse for us?"

Cameo panicked within her new mind, remembering.

*Recycle. Recycle. Recycle ...*

What was she thinking when she put her thumb to the recycling contract back at Autumn's Reach? What possible benefit could she have hoped to obtain? Immortality? Or had she merely been afraid of death?

Yet back when she was the rapidly failing Leticia Isaacs, no one had objected, least of all her, to using the leftover portions of her mind. They had used them to animate Cameo's humanlike personality and form: an android no one could bring to "life" without the construct derived from an actual human mind. Something inside her frantically tried to convince her, over and over, that she was still Letty, but she wasn't certain *what* she was. She was worried that she might not be alive at all.

Desperately, Cameo tried to express her doubts to her superior, but found herself unable. Those doubts belonged to the memory of a woman no longer there.

"Yes, sir," she said. "I'm going to be an excellent little workhorse." And she smiled pleasantly at him.

It couldn't be helped. The smile was wired in. □

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# Hunter's Pink

## By John Gregory Betancourt

### Art by Charles Lang

I stood in the starship's hatch and gazed out across the planet Father had bought the week before, feeling nothing but misery. *Boring, boring, boring.* Who wanted to own a planet like *this*?

A blood-colored sun hung low in the sky, and heat-waves shimmered over the ruby desert sands that stretched endlessly in all directions. Trees — that's what Temple, our guide, named those tall spiked plants with the red globules around their crowns — clustered about the oasis like colossal sentinels.

Hunter's Pink. The name seemed more a joke than anything else. If not for the survey reports I wouldn't have believed the planet capable of supporting much life. I certainly had little desire to find out. But hunting was Father's latest craze, and Jake and I *would* enjoy it because Father told us to.

I turned my attention to Father, who paced impatiently on the ground beside our guide. "How long?" Father blustered for the sextaquadrillionth time, waving his hands as if that would help. "I'm paying you to get things done, not sit around and wait for natives!"

"They'll get here." Temple drawled his words like he had all the time in the universe. He was human, middle-aged but not really old, with skin tanned dark from years' exposure to the suns of alien worlds — handsome, I supposed, in a rough sort of way. We'd picked him up in orbit the day before.

"Better be soon," Father said. "Action's what I'm here for, and action's what I expect!"

Temple turned and squinted out at the desert. Father might be a boor and a loudmouth and a braggart, but he was paying some rather exorbitant guide fees and Temple needed us a lot more than we needed him. Only Temple didn't seem to realize that, or if he did, he still wasn't paying any attention to Father's guff.

Frowning, I unclipped binoculars from my belt and raised them for a scan. Distant dunes leapt a hundred times closer, but I caught no movement yet. The suzumi would be coming from the north: we'd spotted their caravan when we flamed down from orbit a few hours before. According to Temple, time meant something different to them, and they might appear in the next few minutes or a week from now. We would just have to wait.

"Will they be here before tomorrow?" Father demanded again.

"Soon," Temple promised.

I put down my binocs. Suddenly the whole implausibility of it all reached me, and I had a hard time keeping from laughing.

My father, Faraday Meriman IV, arguably one of the ten richest humans in the universe, had bought this desert planet on a whim, scooped my brother and me from under the ever-watchful eyes of our tutors,

and carted us here for something he called "a safari" — all in the space of three days. I hadn't even had time to decently research the place. We just picked up and left.

I guessed Father hadn't done much research, either: he looked rather ridiculous in green camouflage-pants and shirt (certainly useless in a planet done all in shades of red). With antique pith helmet to keep the sun off his head, twin Holzar 10-round autopistols at his sides, and real doeskin boots (also done in camouflage green), he fitted out as the Ultra Complete Big Game Hunter from some exclusive vid-catalog. All he needed was an imposing projectile rifle, and he had a dozen of *those* in his cabin.

I was (as usual) decked out in an ultra-frigid gray daysuit, modded to sixty-six degrees no matter what the environment. My twin brother Jake, whom I hadn't seen since we atmosphered, had been dressed much the same.

Father continued to pace. The discomfort of the trip down from our star-cruiser, the heat and sun, and now the delays must have eaten at his patience. He was a man used to getting what he wanted when he wanted it. Sweat soaked his hair and face; he dabbed at it with a camouflage handkerchief, grunted once, then turned and swaggered back toward the ship. I cleared way for him, and he patted my shoulder as he passed.

"Good to see you taking an interest," he said, and I thought: *Score one point for me.*

Temple stayed outside to wait. It looked like nothing was going to happen today, but I slipped to the ground and padded out anyway.

"Which one are you?" he asked.

"Theodore. Friends call me Ted. My brother calls me Theo."

"You don't sound too happy, Ted."

I shrugged. "I'll live."

"Where is Jacob? I haven't seen him yet."

"Sulking, I imagine. He was planning a holiday on Paradise when Father dragged us here."

"Is that another of your father's planets?"

"One of his pleasure worlds, yes."

He shook his head. "How people can own planets ..."

"He paid cash."

"A man can live maybe a hundred years if he's careful. Maybe a bit more, with science helping. But a planet exists *billions* of years. Rather, I should say they own people."

"That's crazy."

"Aw, shit. Maybe when you're older you'll understand." He shook his head again.





"Father would fire you if he heard you cursing. It's one of his quirks."

"You're old enough to find out how people really talk."

"I suppose."

"But thanks for warning me." He looked down and smiled, face breaking into unexpected planes and angles, teeth strikingly white against sunbrowned skin. "You'll do okay, I think," he said slowly. "Don't know about your father or brother. But you'll do okay."

"What do you mean?" I asked. But he turned and looked out into the desert, and would say no more.

I woke later that night to the sharp *crack!* of rifle-fire. Three shots, I counted, then silence.

"Light!" I commanded. The cabin brightened.

Jake's bunk was empty. And he'd taken a rifle from the rack. *Trouble*. It had to be him ... but what had he found to shoot at?

Rolling to one side, I scooped an autopistol from its holster. *Keep it small and practical*, I thought. I was on my feet and sprinting half a second later. Much as I disliked Jake, I still watched out for him as much as I could. "Family comes first" had always been our motto.

The corridor stretched dark and empty ahead of me, and I left it that way. If we had trouble outside, I didn't want to silhouette myself in the shuttle's hatch.

The door at the end of the hall abruptly opened and Father stumbled out, pupils dilated moon-big, looking totally tranquil. Probably speedtiming the wait for the suzumi, I thought; he'd be useless. I didn't say a word, though. Pushing around him, I ran the length of the ship to the front hatch.

It stood open. A fight of some kind was going on outside. As my eyes adjusted to the three moons' glow, I realized Temple and Jake were struggling over an autorifle.

I slipped to the ground, thumping the pistol's safety. It took bare seconds to maneuver around the two.

Then Temple did a quick flip that ended in a kick to Jake's gut. My brother collapsed with a faint *woof*, curled into a fetal ball, and began wheezing for air.

Stepping forward, I put my pistol to the back of Temple's head and cocked the trigger. I didn't know what had happened to start the fight, but I intended to find out. And Temple had better have a good explanation for beating up my brother.

"Drop the rifle," I said in my best Voice of Authority.

Temple stiffened. Slowly, with one hand, he tossed the rifle to one side.

"Didn't hear you coming," he said.

"Hit — him — !" Jake gasped.

"You're not helping!" I told Jake. To Temple I said, "What's all this about?"

"Suzumi don't take kindly to being murdered. Your brother started shooting at them."

"Jake ..." I sighed in disgust.

"I — didn't — know —" he gasped.

"Did he hit any?" I asked Temple.

"Doubt it, the way he was aiming. But I'd best have a look, see what needs to be done to patch things up. Don't want trouble with the suzumi."

"Go on, then," I said. I lowered my pistol.

He trotted off into the darkness without a backward glance.

"I didn't realize they were the suzumi," Jake said softly. "They just swarmed over the dune like a pack of *kunja* rats."

"Ah." I knew what he meant; on Horizon, our home world, *kunja* rats traveled in packs of a hundred or so, eating whatever animals they could catch or corner. We'd been taught to burn first and ask questions later when it came to wildlife. But here on Hunter's Pink it was a different situation entirely, and he should've known better.

I stuck the pistol into my pocket, retrieved Jake's rifle, and only then bent to see to my brother. He glared and shrugged me away. *Typical*. He'd just had the wind knocked out of him, I decided, when he pulled himself to his feet.

Just then Father made it to the hatch. "What's going on down there?" he demanded.

"Trouble with the suzumi, Father," I said. "Jake started shooting them. I took care of it."

"Good boy, Ted," he said, and turned and stumbled back toward his cabin.

*Second point*, I thought. *Jake's slipping*.

"Thanks, Theo," my brother said, voice oozing sarcasm.

"Anytime," I replied smugly.

But when Father woke the next morning, he had no memory of the night before, to my consternation and my brother's delight. Temple of course made no mention of it, and as a point of honor I couldn't bring it up. So far as Father was concerned, the suzumi had mysteriously appeared, set up camp at the oasis, and graciously let Temple persuade them to act as our trackers and camp-tenders during the hunt.

After breakfast, Temple escorted Jake and me out to see our suzumi. There were perhaps fifty of them milling about the oasis, and in the day's bright light they looked rather daunting: adults over two meters tall at the shoulder, each massing at least five hundred standard kilos. A red shag of hair completely covered their six-limbed bodies, patterning in darker zig-zags across backs and haunches. When they moved, it was in short, uneven hops. Several faced us as we approached, and I noticed two sets of tiny hands tucked close to their chests.

"Are you sure they're sentient?" Jake asked.

"They keep tools in pouches under their bellies," Temple said. "Turned up in dissections, luckily, else we might be hunting them now."

Temple stopped a respectable distance away and called something in an odd half-whistle, half-speech. Several suzumi seemed to know him. Three hopped forward, warbling a few notes that could have been a greeting.

Temple introduced Jake and me, and told us names too fast and whistly to remember. He seemed fluent in their language.

I asked, "Did it take you long to learn suzumi?"

"A few months," he said. "It's quite simple, perhaps eight thousand words. Most describe environment. They have twelve different names for sand, for instance."

Jake shook his head. "Can't they make up their minds?"

"Each describes a different type of sand," I said, realizing what Temple meant and feeling superior. "I would imagine there's quite a variety on a desert planet."

"Exactly," Temple said, grinning. "The fine dust that blows at night is *sa-a-al*, good for tracking, and the granular dust that makes up most of the dunes around this oasis is *Siss-a-al*, good for walking. Later today, when we head toward the sand-marshes, you'll see *Yasiss-a-al*, dangerous for walking."

"Sand is sand," Jake said, and he turned his back on us. Father had opened the starship's cargo hold and begun backing out the landcar. Jake jogged over to help him.

"He doesn't like you," Temple said.

"Nor you," I said. "But then he doesn't have to."

"Why?" He seemed genuinely concerned.

"It's because — " I hesitated. What was I doing, talking family politics to an outsider? But it seemed strangely easy to say it all to Temple, to let him unburden my soul. He could gain nothing by it, couldn't use us like so many others had tried.

I said, "It's because Father has decided only one of us will inherit his fortune, and he's set up a situation where we're always in competition. We're both trying to prove we're the smartest, bravest, most daring, and

so on. It's been that way since we were old enough to understand what it meant. Of course Jacob hates me. And I suppose I must hate him ..."

"That's a large burden to place on children."

My back stiffened. "On over fifty thousand worlds I'm considered a man."

"My pardon. I had not meant to offend."

"Then it's past," I said, forcing myself to unbend. It hurt, being young sometimes.

"I see some of your brother in you: you both have pride."

I laughed at that. "He's a good actor. No matter how he seems today, he hasn't forgotten last night. Don't turn your back on him. If he killed you, Father would certainly hush it up. He's done it before."

"Then again I thank you for your warning," he said. "I will watch myself. And, if you don't mind my asking, how old are you two?"

"Terrestrial?"

He nodded.

"Seventeen," I said reluctantly. "When we're eighteen one of us must start the special training necessary to run Father's empire."

Machinery roared behind us, making further talk difficult. I turned. The shuttle's cargo hatch had opened and Father was backing the landcar out: a huge lumbering affair something over thirty meters long, running on a combination of treads and balloon tires.



# CONTACT

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Repeller fields would have stirred up too much dust here, so we'd gone for the low-tech approach. Suzumi could sit on the cargo platform at the back, which was only half-filled with our camping gear. The inner compartments held a speedcar (Father had promised Jake and me plenty of time to race it), autochef, emergency radio, and various other civilized requirements.

Jake had climbed into the front seat beside Father and now smiled smugly down at me. He started to say something, but the engine drowned out his words. Then Father kicked the landcar into gear and sped in our direction, wheels kicking up plumes of dust.

The suzumi scattered like spooked sheep.

"Hop in," Father called to Temple and me. Since Jacob had the front seat, I chose the one directly behind Father. Easier to whisper in his ear as we rode.

Temple slid in beside me, calling to the suzumi as he did. Slowly they returned. The half dozen who were to accompany us tentatively climbed onto the cargo platform and settled down for the ride.

"Head due south," Temple said to Father, pointing. "That's boorgwal country. They like the deep desert, and their pelts are something to see."

"They're the gold ones?" Jake asked suddenly. It seemed he *had* done a bit of research.

"No, you're thinking of catastasters," Temple said. "But we won't be hunting them; they're protected by League law as sentients."

"Huh!" Jake said. "Low-graders."

"But still sentients," I said. "You might as well shoot suzumi."

He turned an enraged look on me, but I just sat back and pretended not to notice. No points with Father, but a definite personal score.

By noon Father was bitching about finding game: "Four hours and not a sign of life," he said, pounding the steering wheel for emphasis. "I'm not paying you to drag me through desert," he told Temple. "And I'm certainly not paying you if I don't have any action!"

"Soon," Temple promised.

I found I didn't blame Father: this endless red desert had begun to overwhelm me, too. As I sat, eyes half-hooded, my thoughts began to wander. Fantasy took over, and then it seemed to me we were floating on a sea of blood. The whisper of sand under our treads and tires became the sussurant hiss of waves, and our engine's roar shaped the voice of distant monsters. Still we forged ahead, up and down, up and down, all the noise and throbbing vibration grinding on and on until my head ached and I thought I'd have to scream or go insane.

Suddenly the suzumi whistled. Temple rose from his seat. "Stop," he commanded.

Father ground the landcar to a halt. The engine's roar lessened; dust began to settle around us. Wide awake, I peered around us with growing excitement.

"Game?" Father demanded.

Temple pointed to the dune ahead. "Catasters on the other side. We'll go around."

"Nonsense." Father churned the landcar into gear. We roared up the hill. "I want to see them."

"This isn't a good idea," Temple said. "I doubt we'll

have trouble, but it's always best to leave catastasters strictly alone. They weren't named after *catastrophes* for nothing!"

"I'll give you a bonus to cover it. Hazard pay."

Temple shut up, but looked distinctly unhappy. Jake smirked. Father had made it quite clear he was running things and we would do what we darn well pleased. Still, Temple didn't seem like an alarmist, and I made sure my autopistol's safety was off.

When we hit the dune's crest, Father killed the engine. Below lay an oasis like the one where we'd landed. I raised my binocs for a better view.

As water and trees leaped close, I found myself staring into the yellow-red face of a catastaster. The eyes caught mine, and for a second I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. I shivered helplessly. Raw, primal savagery, a *kill-lust*, lived in those eyes. They were the eyes of a snake or a Cygnus spider or a bogey weasel, made a thousand times more terrible by the raw intelligence behind them.

"They play with their food before they kill it," Temple said in a quiet voice. "Sometimes it can take days for their prey to die."

I downed magnification. Now I could see eight of them, each a good five meters long from snout to stub of tail, each built like a miniature tank with legs. Their paws ended in huge rounded pads ten sizes too large ... so they could travel the desert sands, I realized. Their heads were narrow and their noses came almost to a point. When one opened its mouth and said something to the next one, I glimpsed rows of razorlike black teeth.

"They don't look so tough," Jake said slowly, and he had a calculating look I didn't like.

Temple said, "They're fast. And their skeletons effectively armor them."

"What should we do if they attack?"

"The surest way to kill one is hit the head — and your bullet still might glance off the skull. I always shoot for the eyes, myself."

Jake turned. "You've hunted them?"

"I helped break this world in '44, and we blundered into a pack of them by accident. We killed six. They killed fifteen of us, and crippled two more." He held up his left arm. For the first time I noticed a long, jagged scar — faded by time, but still unmistakable. "I got a souvenir, too. Hurt like hell."

"Watch your language," Father said sharply, not taking his eyes off the catastasters.

We stayed for perhaps another ten minutes. The catastasters were all looking our way by then, and suddenly two of them let out low howls. It was an unpleasant sound, like nothing I had ever heard before, and it set the hair on the back of my neck on end. The whole pack started to rise, talking amongst themselves, stretching and pawing the sand.

"Let's get moving," I said suddenly.

"Afraid?" Jake mocked.

"I am," Temple said. He looked at Father. "Turn around," he urged. "You're lucky it's afternoon. At night, they *would* attack. And we'd be lucky to get out alive."

Mumbling about cowardice, Father put the landcar in reverse and backed down the dune. Engine roaring,

we circled well around the oasis, then Temple brought us back on course.

"We'll have good hunting tomorrow," he promised. "Baxter's hooligans, or Pink elephants if we're lucky." And he began to spin a yarn about the first drunken explorer to run across a Pink elephant ...

When we stopped at an oasis late that afternoon to set up camp, the suzumi hopped off the cargo platform. Temple whistled commands and they began unloading our packs, pitching our tents on the other side of the spike-trees, and generally moving about their tasks with enviable speed and efficiency. If only our servants back home could have seen the way they worked!

Finally, with tents up and the landcar unloaded, the suzumi moved off by themselves. They knelt in a circle, whistle-talking, and I listened to the musical lull of their voices.

Temple tapped me on the shoulder, startling me. "Go to bed early," he said. "You're going to need your rest for tomorrow."

"I suppose," I said.

"Trust me." He winked, then shouldered his rifle and looked to the east. "It'll be a busy day from the looks of things."

Father looked up from cleaning his rifle and called, "What's that, Temple?"

He said, "I've got to do a bit of scouting."

"That's what we're paying you for," Father rumbled. He turned his attention back to his autorifle.

"Do you know what a Baxter's hooligan is?" Temple asked me.

"Sure," I said. It was a man-sized mammal with a silky red pelt. "I saw them in the survey tape."

"The suzumi say there's a herd nearby, so I'll have a look. We'll go after a few buck hooligans tomorrow. After that, we'll try bigger game."

Father unpacked the autochef after Temple left, and we had a good hot meal: steaks smothered in mushrooms and gravy, green beans, fried potatoes, and lots of strong black coffee. Synthetics all, of course; but then, we'd always had nothing but the best.

Night fell quickly, on the heels of a spectacular sunset that left half the sky glowing red as blood. A low moaning wind came up from the east; sand began to hiss around us, drifting up against the tents and landcar.

Rather than take Temple's advice, I holed up in my tent, planning to spend a leisurely evening watching TDs on my wrist player (I'd only thought to bring it at the last minute, and the eight chips of programming I'd grabbed would have to do me all week). It was late when I finally nodded off to the rip-roaring adventures of Starke of the Space Patrol.

Too early, a loud metallic noise woke me. The tent's door transparented at my command. I could see dawn just breaking outside, and in silhouette, suzumi banging metal plates together in a wild frenzy of activity.

Darn aliens, I thought. Groaning, I crawled from my sleepbag, rubbed my eyes, and began mechanically

Hunter's Pink

pulling on my daysuit. It grew cool when I activated it.

Feeling somewhat more alive, I pushed out of my tent. Father and Jake had beaten me to the table. I meandered over, yawning.

"Faulty equipment!" Father was growling at the autochef. He had the top off the thing and was putting around inside with a butter knife.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Frozen liver," Jake said sourly. I followed his gaze to the pile of discarded breakfasts: iced-over synthaliver and some green glop that might have been peas if you squinted.

"There," said Father. "I think that should do it." He shut the lid and dialed up pancakes smothered in butter and syrup.

The autochef sort of hiccupped. A thin line of greasy black smoke rose from its lid, and the selection buttons blinked, flickered, died. The door opened and two more plates of frozen synthaliver slid out. I stared at them in disgust.

"Problem?" Temple asked, behind us.

"It's broken," Father sounded annoyed. "I don't understand it."

"Dust," Temple said. "It blows all night and gets into everything. I'd thought your autochef would last longer than the first day, though. They usually do. Must be a cheap one."

I didn't bother to mention one of Father's companies made this particular brand, and that it was highly regarded around the galaxy.

"What do you suggest?" Father asked almost humbly.

Temple turned to the suzumi and whistled. They dropped their metal plates and came running with Temple's packs. "I brought some dried treefruit," he said. "It's a bit sour, but healthy enough. Tonight we'll roast a hooligan."

"You mean eat ... its *flesh*?" Jake said.

"I've done it," Father said slowly. "Don't worry, it's not as bad as it sounds. Hard to tell from the real thing, in fact." He grinned. "In some places, if I recall correctly, it's even considered a delicacy. It'll make men of you two."

After a spartan breakfast of Temple's "treefruit" (which somehow managed to taste like burnt bacon and cheap champagne at once), we piled into the landcar. This time I beat Jake and got the prized front seat next to Father. Jake shook his head ruefully and settled in beside Temple. The suzumi piled onto the now-empty cargo platform. Everyone in place, we set out for the hooligans Temple had spotted the night before.

The dunes were equally dismal today, I discovered. This world seemed uniquely bleak, and out of all the planets I'd been to, it ranked bottom on my Must Visit Again list.

We headed south for what seemed hours. The red sun beat down. I felt empty, completely drained of will after a while, and couldn't even muster much hatred toward Jake. That's how bad the desert was.

"This is it," Temple finally said. "Hooligan country."

Father stopped, and I scanned the land around us with little enthusiasm: nothing to be seen. Sand-bur-

rowers, I remembered, then, from the survey tape.

Father picked up his autorifle, but apparently didn't see anything either. He looked at Temple and said, "Well?"

"They're buried," Temple said. He snapped up his rifle and fired at one of the nearby dunes. A creature yowled and humped itself out of the dune, sand streaming from its reddish-brown body. It dove lower on the sand-dune and dug itself in. Moments later you could scarcely tell it had been there.

Temple said, "It takes two shots. When you see what looks like a burrow — a dimple on the side of a dune — you shoot about a foot to the side. The vibrations will flush the hooligan out. You'll have perhaps five seconds to make a killing shot. Aim for the head or the darker red area on its chest."

"Hey!" Jake said. "I see them!"

"Me too," I said, standing. And I did: now that I knew what to look for, I spotted literally dozens of burrows in the nearby dunes. I took one of the autorifles from the back and switched it to single bullets.

Father took first turn. A hooligan burst from the sand, and Father dropped it with a quick shot to the head. It twitched and jerked for half a minute, but finally lay still.

"Nicely placed," Temple said, for the first time properly appreciative. "You'll get a nice pelt off that one." He whistled to the suzumi, and four of them ran across to the dead hooligan, picked it up, and carried it back.

I stared at the creature. Up close, the thing seemed utterly alien. It had six limbs, like the suzumi and the catasters, but these were short and ended in blunt pads. Its head was the oddest part, with small red eyes that stared vacantly into space. Its mouth ended in a suckerlike protuberance.

The suzumi tossed it onto the cargo platform with no ceremony.

"They'll skin it for us when we get back to camp," Temple said. "Your turn, Ted."

I raised my rifle, sighted at a burrow near the one Father had emptied, and squeezed the trigger. When the bullet hit sand, a hooligan rose with a startled yelp. This one was bigger than Father's, and it humped down the dune fast as a Jericho rabbit.

I drew a bead and snapped off a shot. My bullet hit its head dead center, and a gray-black goo sprayed from the back of its skull. It fell at once.

"Excellent shot," Temple said, sounding genuinely impressed, and once more the suzumi were dispatched to bring the hooligan back. I arched my back with pride; let Jake try to top that!

Jake didn't wait to be told to shoot. He stood in his seat and squeezed the trigger, fanning the dunes with a burst of automatic fire. Dozens of hooligans burst from hiding, squalling in fear and pain. Jake raked his fire over them as they fled, hitting eight or ten, killing none. In seconds they were buried again. Only bloodstains marked their flight.

Temple jerked the gun from Jake's hands. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded.

"Hey! Give me that!"

Temple tossed it to me. "That's it for you today," he told Jake. "There are rules to hunting, and you've just

broken the biggest — no cruelty."

"Father!" Jake cried.

My heart leaped when Father shook his head. "He's running the hunt, son."

"You don't shoot to hit," Temple said harshly. "If that's what you want, go to a target range. The object of a hunt — a real hunt — is to strive against your own physical limitations, to learn to find and take that single perfect shot. You don't leave a trail of crippled, suffering animals behind you. That's sick."

Jake was sullen the rest of the afternoon, but it seemed a glorious day to me. Hunter's Pink wasn't such a bad planet after all. I shot four more hooligans, and Father took eight. I'd never been prouder of a trophy.

Later, back at camp, the suzumi skinned our hooligans and began the process of tanning their hides. Temple bled one, carved thick steaks from its haunches, and started broiling them over a gas burner he'd brought. The meat smelled like nothing I'd ever encountered before, and to my surprise and disgust I found my mouth watering.

"You'll like it," Temple told us, and bent to the cooking with a will.

Half an hour later, he switched off the gas and began serving up steaks, along with more dried treefruit. The suzumi whistled until he threw them steaks as well.

When Temple set a plate before me, I just stared at it. The meat was part charred, part raw, and dripping grease: about as far from a civilized meal as you could come.

"Eat up," Father said, gesturing with his fork. He cut a big piece of hooligan and stuffed it into his mouth. "You'll need your energy tomorrow. Temple says we're going after bigger game."

"Pink elephants," Temple said between bites. "If I can find a herd. Or perhaps boorgwals. This is their territory."

I looked down at my plate and fought back nausea. Perhaps, I decided, *pretending it's a new program from the autochef will help*. That idea firmly in mind, I took a small bite.

The meat didn't quite have the right texture or taste (but then, what was hooligan *supposed* to taste like?). Still, it was at least palatable, I decided. As long as I didn't think of it as the flesh of an animal, I doubted I'd have much trouble.

Jake was having difficulty choking down his hooligan, too. No points for either of us.

After we'd all finished, Temple stood and announced, "I'm going to take a look-see for those Pink elephants. There should be some west of here, I figure, but they're tricky and may take a while to spot. I'll probably be back late. I want to get an early start tomorrow, so get to bed early."

"Sounds good to me," Father said, leaning back and rubbing his belly. Yawning, he stood and started for his tent.

"How about you?" Temple asked Jake and me.

"A little later," I said.

Jake didn't bother to answer: still sulking, I thought.

"Don't forget," Temple said. Shouldering his rifle, he struck out across the dunes. The sun was just settling

down, and it cast the sky in brilliant shades of pink and red, pink as the Pink elephants we would hunt tomorrow, red as the blood of the hooligans we'd killed.

As soon as Temple vanished behind the nearest dune, Jake stood. "Want to go on a private hunt, Theo?" "What do you mean?" I asked, instantly suspicious. "That bastard don't stop me from hunting. What an asshole!"

"Better not let Father hear you talking that way."

He grinned. "Don't kid me, brother. We can take care of him, too, if we want to. Want to come?"

"I don't think so," I said slowly. I didn't think Jake was treacherous enough to put a bullet in my back, but I'd always been careful enough not to give him the chance.

"You really haven't figured it out yet, have you?"

I stared at him, puzzled. "What?"

"Why we're here — all this." He waved a hand across the camp. "I thought you were at least that smart."

"You're paranoid," I said.

He laughed, but it was true. He'd always been the one to look for ulterior motives and double- and triple-crosses in everyone we met ... and he found them. Often they weren't there, but he found them. Several times he'd even jumped our servants when they came unannounced to clean his room.

"Wait and see," he said knowingly. He went to his tent and returned a minute later with a rifle in hand. I couldn't help but notice the extra ammo clipped to his belt — enough to take on a small army.

"Just in case," he said, patting it and grinning. "Sure you won't come?"

"No," I said. "I'm positive."

"Your loss," he said. "See you later, Theo."

Turning, he headed south at a brisk walk. I watched him go with some trepidation. What was he really up to? He'd been hinting at something, then lorded it over me when I couldn't figure it out.

Only later, as I was undressing for sleep, did I realize he'd set off in the direction we'd seen the catasters the day before. Still, he'd have the sense to avoid them, I thought. Either that, or the inheritance problem would be solved.

I'd just managed to doze off when I heard the crunch of boots on sand outside my tent.

"Theo?" Jake whispered. He rapped on the tent's frame. "Teddy-boy, give me a hand, will you?"

"What is it?" I rolled out of my sleepbag and, in my underwear, pushed open the tent flap.

"Look what I got." Jake stood outside, something large and dark draped over his shoulders in a fireman's carry.

I squinted. He dropped the carcass so I could see better, and set a foot proudly on its chest.

It was a young cataster, perhaps a meter and a half long.

"Are you crazy?" He demanded. I stepped out of the tent, shivering a bit in the breeze. "Temple will throw a fit!"

"Father will take care of him."

"You'll never get away with it. They're *sentients*!"

"Won't I?" He grinned. Then he picked up the dead cataster and started around our tents, to where the

suzumi lay sleeping.

I followed, sand rough under my bare feet. "Maybe you will, but that still doesn't make it right."

He laughed at me.

The suzumi woke at our approach, making questioning whistles. Jake dropped the cataster and motioned them forward. They hopped over.

When they saw what he had, though, they backed away, making little bleats of fear. I'd never heard a more pitiful noise.

"It's dead!" Jake said. He pointed at the body and made chopping motions with his hands. "Skin it — cut its skin off — understand?"

They continued to back away. Enraged, Jake snapped up his rifle and hissed.

They froze. They knew what rifles did; I could see that. And they knew what Jake wanted. They seemed to be weighing their options.

Jake left no doubt about his intentions. He pointed to the skinning knives and the hooligan pelts spread out to dry, then to the cataster. Then he clicked the safety off his autorifle.

The suzumi whistled to each other. Slowly, reluctantly it seemed to me, they approached and spread the cataster out on its back. Picking up knives, they cut a slit along its belly and began working it out of its pelt.

While Jake kept guard, I slipped back into my tent and sealed the flaps. I didn't want to think about it — wouldn't think about it — until Temple got back. He'd know what to do.

I wasn't sleepy anymore. Flipping on my TD, I stuck in a new chip: *Deathmongers of Pavo IV* this time, a sensationalist documentary on the Pavians and their slave-gladiators. Father owned their planet, too.

I nodded off somewhere in the third hour of my TD show. The next thing I knew, rough hands were shaking me and someone was calling my name.

"Light," I called, and it came on.

Temple crouched beside me, rifle slung over his shoulder. I figured he'd just gotten back and found Jake's handiwork.

But all he said was, "The suzumi are gone. What happened? Did your brother start shooting at them again?"

"You didn't see what he did?"

"No. What?"

"You'd better come with me," I said grimly, crawling from my sleepbag. I could feel the cold outside come up suddenly as the night bled away the sand's accumulated warmth, so I pulled on my daysuit.

Then I took him around behind the tents. There, pegged out to dry, was the cataster's hide. It shone in the moonlight like molten gold.

"What — " Temple started. "How — "

"After you left, Jake went hunting on his own. This is what he brought back. He made the suzumi skin it for him at riflepoint."

"Shit," Temple said. "No wonder they left. Give me your binoculars, quick."

I undipped them and handed them over without protest. Temple made a sweep of the horizon. "Shit," he said again. "Shit, shit, shit."

"What?" I demanded.

He handed them back. "Take a good look, Ted, but don't panic. If they come any closer, yell." He headed for Father's tent at a pace that seemed almost a holiday stroll.

I raised the binocs for a look-see. It didn't take an expert: a good dozen catasters lounged atop nearby dunes, looking down on our encampment with lethargic gazes. I found one staring directly at me, and I shivered when it purposefully raised one huge flat paw. Six razor-sharp claws extended a good ten centimeters. And they glistened — with poison?

I lowered the binocs. I could barely keep from shaking.

"Get your brother," Temple called softly from the flap of Father's tent. "Move slowly. Don't let them know anything is wrong or different."

"Then what?" I said.

"We'll have to make a run for your ship. It's our only hope. If they catch us in the open, they'll tear us apart. All of us, not just Jake."

I swallowed. Then I went to my brother's tent, slowly, like I had all the time in the world. If we were going to get out of here alive, I knew we were going to have to do exactly what Temple told us.

Ten minutes later found us piled into the landcar, our possessions hastily stuffed into packs. Jake had a black eye; I'd sucker-punched him, and for the first time I could remember, he hadn't hit me back. Father hadn't said a word yea or nay; he'd just done what Temple said quickly and calmly. I had to give him points for that; when it came to life or death, he shut up and listened for once.

And the catasters were getting closer. You never saw them move; you just looked up, and there they were, another few meters down the dune, just watching, just waiting for you to bolt. They reminded me of a real Terran cat we'd once had, sitting by a mooserat hole in the kitchens, waiting to pounce.

Father pushed in the landcar's ignition cube. The engine started, then abruptly died with a choked gurgle.

"Fuel?" Jake asked, eyes wide.

Father tried again. This time the engine made a helpless grinding sound and refused to turn over at all.

"Dust," Temple said slowly. "It gets into everything. Didn't I tell you?"

"Shut up!" Jake said. "It's not dust! It's just the fuel line! Try again, Father."

Father sat back, a bleak look on his face. "It's the dust," he said, "just like the autochef. There must be faulty seals in the engine valves. Given enough time we can probably clean it out, get it started —"

"How much time do you think the catasters are going to give us?" Temple said, waving at the dunes. "They're toying with us. Trying to make us panic."

"They haven't attacked yet," I said. "Perhaps that means something."

"That's right!" Jake said. "I bet they're afraid of us."

"Do you have a radio here?" Temple asked Father, pointedly ignoring Jake. "Some way to reach your ship in orbit?"

Father nodded. "Of course. It's in with the emergen-

cy supplies."

"Call them. Get them to send another shuttle to pick us up as soon as possible."

"It's going to take hours to get someone here."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"No," he admitted.

"I'll get the radio," I said, and climbed down.

The storage compartment lay directly beneath the cargo platform. Before turning the light on, though, I pulled the door shut behind me — no sense telling the catasters something unusual was going on.

The radio (of course) lay at the very back. I had to climb over the speedcar to get to it. Finally I reached it, grabbed the strap, and hauled it out. Then, shutting off the light, I resealed the door and climbed back up beside my father.

He unfolded the little mesh antenna, angled it toward the stars, and switched the radio on. Luckily it crackled to life.

"Come in, *Narias*," he called. "This is Hunter's Pink. Come in, *Narias*."

"Hello, Hunter's Pink," Jasper, our star-cruiser's captain, answered. "This is *Narias*."

"Meriman here, Jasper," Father said. "We have an emergency situation. Get a shuttle down as fast as you can."

"Base site, or your current location, sir?"

"Current location."

"Medical needs?"

"None yet: trouble with the natives and a landcar malfunction. Better send a full medkit, though, just in case."

"Hang on ..." The pause stretched to minutes. Then Jasper came back. "Crew dispatched, sir. We're projecting arrival at five hours, fourteen minutes from now. Anything I can help with meantime?"

"Just pray. We're surrounded by angry catasters."

"Yessir."

"Meriman out." Father switched off the set. Then he turned to us and said, "We're going to have to wait it out, somehow."

"I have an idea," I said, remembering the speedcar in the storage compartment. "Why don't we split up?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Temple said.

Father said, "You're learning, Ted. Never put all your valuables in one basket. What do you have in mind?"

"The speedcar," I said. "I saw it when I got the radio. I could use it to make a distraction, get the catasters to chase me. Then you could head for our ship."

"A good idea," Father mused, "except I'm going to be the one to stay behind." He turned to Temple. "Take my sons back to the base camp. My company can afford to lose me, or Ted, or Jake, but not all three of us."

"I want to stay with you," Jake said.

A useless gesture — but I couldn't help wishing I'd made it first.

"You know you can't," he said. "The speedcar only fits one. And it wouldn't need the extra weight."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Temple said. "The catasters are fast, and if the speedcar gives out you won't stand much chance of making it back here."

"I know," he said grimly. "Now, Ted, you and Temple fetch the weapons and ammo in my tent. Jake and I



will get the speedcar out."

"Right," I said.

The catasters had crept closer still while we were talking on the landcar; you didn't need binoculars to see them clearly anymore. They were the dark shapes on all the dunes around us. I counted fifteen.

Temple and I headed for Father's tent. The slow, slow pace we kept infuriated me; I wanted to run, to get the weapons as fast as I could, and had to fight to keep myself calm.

"Raw meat," Temple said suddenly.

"What?"

"Can't you smell it?"

And then I could: an unpleasant sickly-sweet odor. It was coming from behind the tents. It couldn't be the hooligans; I'd watched the suzumi drag their bodies off for burial on the other side of the oasis.

We drew autopistols. Cautiously we crept around the tents.

Our six suzumi guides lay in a heap. They had all been skinned and piled on top of the hooligan pelts. And parts of them were missing — a few legs, a few arms, stomachs ripped open and the inner organs gouged out. I had a hard time looking without being sick, even in the moonlight, and I'd always prided myself on a strong stomach. Perhaps that's why the catasters hadn't attacked yet, I thought: they'd eaten their fill of our native guides. Now they could afford the time to toy with us, to extract a slow, lingering revenge.

"They took the dead cataster," Temple said, and I noticed it was gone for the first time. "They have a death ceremony, I've heard. Part of what makes them sentient. Come on, let's find the ammo and get back to the landcar."

I followed him to Father's tent. Inside, crates of weapons lay just where I'd known they'd be, next to the door. Temple slung several of Father's best autopistols over his shoulder and hefted as many boxes of bullets and ammo-clips as he could carry. I took percussion grenades and autopistols. Then we headed back for the landcar.

By the time we got there, the catasters had moved still closer. I could see their red eyes glinting as they stared down at us.

Father and Jake had the speedcar out. It resembled a plumber's nightmare more than anything else: a frame consisting of durasteel tubes, with a small bucket seat and steering bar inside, and a micro motor in back. The three large, balloonlike tires marked it as a desert vehicle. It had been built for speed, not comfort.

Father strapped himself in. I passed him a pair of autopistols, extra clips of ammo, and half a dozen percussion grenades, all of which he clipped to his shirt and belt.

"I guess this is it," Temple said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," he said gruffly.

He pressed the ignition, sent the motor roaring, and put the speedcar in gear. Tires skidding on sand, he raced between catasters, accelerating all the while. He practically flew up the first dune.

I grabbed my binoculars. The catasters were running after him. Distantly, I heard the first of the

percussion grenades go off, a muted *whump* of sound. Father must have thrown it behind him. I didn't know how well it would work against aliens, but it was certainly enough to stun or kill a man.

He circled the oasis once, throwing more grenades, and then I heard the sharp reports of an autopistol firing. I knew what he was trying to do: goad them all into following him. It seemed to work; I didn't see a single cataster around us anymore.

Temple had our packs ready. He thrust one at Jake and one at me, then shouldered his own. Without a moment's hesitation, he turned and hit a quick pace back toward our ship.

Jake and I followed, struggling to keep up.

Only when we'd left our camp well behind and the wind had covered our tracks did Temple slow down. Wheezing for breath, we drew up beside him.

"I can't believe it worked," he said wonderingly.

"I just hope Father's all right," I said. "The speedcar's battery is only good for two hundred kilometers."

"He'll be fine," Jake said. "He's a survivor, like me."

"You better hope he is," Temple said. "You'll need him to hush up that murder. I intend to report it."

"What —" Jake began.

"The cataster," I said. "You'd forgotten already?"

Jake shut up suddenly.

"In case the catasters chase us and we have to separate," Temple said, "I want to show you how to get back to our camp."

Jake and I gave him our full attention.

"See that star? The bright one near the horizon?"

We both nodded.

"It's due north of here, and our base camp is pretty much a straight line in that direction. When you get close, you should be able to see the oasis from the top of any dune. That star's the brightest one in that hemisphere, so you won't lose it."

Only after he'd finished did I realize what a mistake he'd made: by telling Jake and me how to get back, he'd ended his usefulness. And he was the only non-family witness to the murder Jake committed.

"There's a smaller oasis ahead," Temple continued. "We can take a rest there." He shouldered his pack and set off.

*Brave man.* I would've made Jake walk in front, if I were him. I knew my brother had started worrying as soon as Temple mentioned murder, and when Jake worried he got dangerous. If Jake shot the two of us, who'd find our bodies out here? He'd just say catasters got us. And if catasters finished Father off, too ... well, that would leave poor Jake alone in the world. And sole heir to the Meriman fortune. I knew it would be tempting him.

*But what if Father's still alive?*

Perhaps that thought would keep us safe. Nevertheless, I made sure Jake walked ahead of me.

Ten minutes later, I noticed Jake easing an autopistol from his belt. I took two quick steps and knocked it from his hand.

He spun on me, cursing.

"Don't try it," I said.

"We don't need him!" he whispered. "Help me, Theo

Temple turned, his own autopistol out.  
 "He was getting ready to shoot you in the back," I said.

"We should have left you for the catasters," Temple spat. "You're the only one they wanted, and you certainly deserve it. Damn spoiled murdering brat!"

Jake just glared at him.

"Drop your pack," Temple said, cocking his autopistol. "Ted, take his weapons."

I did as instructed, and Jake didn't dare protest with Temple holding a weapon on him. I got the distinct impression Temple would have welcomed any excuse to shoot my brother. I didn't blame him; Jake had certainly gone too far. Murdering aliens is bad enough, but murdering *humans* —

Soon I had a good-sized pile of knives, autopistols, ammo-clips, and percussion grenades stacked beside me. I patted Jake down one last time and didn't find so much as an extra piece of lint, so I stood back and nodded to Temple.

"Traitor," Jake said to me, through clenched teeth.

I just shrugged. It was one thing to deliberately get my brother in trouble. But all I'd done was sit back and let him hang himself.

"Put the weapons in your pack," Temple told me. I did so. He continued, "We're going to have to split up. You go on, Ted; I'll follow with Jake."

"Don't you want help watching him?"

He shook his head. "Less distraction if I can focus on him alone. I don't want him jumping me. And if he does, I want someone safe who knows what happened. I'm counting on you, Ted."

"No problem." I picked up my pack, shrugged it on, and set off, following the northern star. I looked back a couple of times, but didn't see them. The only sound was the shush of wind around me.

I fell into a monotonous rhythm, losing track of time, just walking on and on and on across endless dunes. Once I spotted hooligan burrows, but I avoided them and kept myself straight on course. The north star glimmered down, bright as a beacon, calling me home.

Then I heard sand crunching behind me — footsteps.

I dropped and rolled, autopistol leaping to hand. But it was Temple, not a cataster. I stared in surprise as he jogged to catch up.

"Where's Jake?" I demanded, standing and brushing myself off.

"It's his fault," Temple panted. "He deserves whatever happens to him. I knew you wouldn't do anything, so I did it myself. You'll thank me later."

"Did he try to jump you?"

He shook his head. "I didn't give him a chance."

"How could you?" I cried. "He's *human*. Humans have to stick together — when it comes down to a fight, it's us against any aliens, no matter what the cause. How else are we going to survive as a species?"

Temple sneered. "I've seen what humans are doing to the universe. Humans like your father and your brother are raping a hundred thousand cultures, destroying a million different worlds. Give me aliens

any day."

"Perhaps you're right," I said slowly. "But I have to know — what did you do with Jake?"

He gestured vaguely back the way he'd come. "There's an oasis a klick or two back. I staked him out. The catasters will find him eventually, and they'll have fun with him. Did you know they have a rough sense of justice? Sort of 'an eye for an eye.' I bet they roll him out of his skin like the suzumi did to their cub —"

I smiled at the poetic justice of it all. Then I raised my autopistol and fired. The slug passed within a centimeter of Temple's right ear. He staggered back, shocked, startled.

"That's to prove I'm serious," I said. "Draw your weapons — slowly! — and drop them to the sand. If you don't, the next one's going through your brain."

Numbly, it seemed, he tossed his projectile weapons to the ground. I maneuvered around him, putting my pistol to his spine at the small of his back, and patted him down. I removed two knives and a hidden pistol.

"Why?" he demanded, as I gathered everything up.

"He's my brother." I fired a shot at his feet. "You have ten seconds to clear my line of sight. And if I do see you again, I won't hesitate to put a bullet through your skull."

His lip pulled back in a sneer. "You're like your brother after all."

"Nine seconds," I said.

Turning, he jogged up the next dune. I trailed him for a few minutes to make sure he wasn't doubling back on me, but he was headed away as fast as he could.

And then I started back for Jake.

A third moon was rising, and the sand glimmered like water. Our trail lay clear; I'd have little trouble finding my way to Jake. No matter what he was, no matter what he'd done, he was still my brother, still family.

An hour later I found the oasis. Jake lay spread-eagled beneath spiked, alien trees, his arms and legs tied to stakes, a gag stuffed in his mouth. I knelt beside him and pulled the gag.

"Temple —" he gasped.

"I took care of him," I said grimly. I cut the ropes and he sat up, massaging wrists and ankles. "Can you walk?"

"I ... I think so." He paused, a strange look on his face. "Theo ... Ted ... thank you."

It was the first time he'd ever said that to me. *Thank you*. I felt a rush of warmth toward him I'd seldom felt before.

"No problem, brother." I gave him my hand and helped him to his feet. He leaned on my shoulder, and together we headed for our base camp.

We never made it. Just after dawn, a shuttle roared overhead, spotted us, circled around, landed.

Father stood in the hatch, grinning and waving. We ran to catch up.

Three hours later, we were back in orbit. Twelve hours after that, we were headed home.

Jake stuck his head in my bedroom. "Father wants to see us," he said. "Something's up, Ted. Something big."

He'd been acting different in the three weeks we'd been back from Hunter's Pink: subdued, somehow. More serious, more thoughtful, more ... human. I guess, in the hours he lay waiting for the catastrophes to find him, waiting to die, he'd had a chance to do some serious thinking about who and what he was. For the first time, I found myself actually liking him. No more mean tricks. No more one-upmanship. No more fights between us. It actually felt good to be his brother.

I rose and, side by side, we went to Father's office.

Father sat at his desk. He waved us in, and we sat before him. I had never felt so jittered up with nerves in my life, and suddenly I realized why: *He's picked his heir.*

"As you both know," Father said slowly, and I had a sinking feeling he was about to launch into one of his great lectures, "I worked hard throughout my life to increase our family's fortune. But I'm getting old now, and it's soon going to be time to pass the corporate reins to a younger man. We went to Hunter's Pink because I wanted to watch you both, to see how you act under pressure, to get to know the men you've become. And I like what I see.

"And so I've picked my successor." He turned and looked me in the eye. "I'm sorry, Ted," he said softly, and the weight of the universe crashed down on me. "I've chosen Jake."

My brother and I both sat in stunned silence for what seemed an eternity.

I almost missed it when Father went on, "I've set up a trust fund for you, Ted. You'll never be without anything. But you don't have what it takes to run the company."

"Why Jake?" I asked, voice hoarse.

"Because he has a killer instinct. Because he inspires loyalty — even in you, his greatest rival. You went back for him. That's loyalty. That's what it takes to run my business."

I rose on legs weak as gelatin. "Father," I said slowly, carefully. "Fuck you. Fuck you and your whole damn company."

While he sputtered, shocked, horrified, I walked out.

I headed back for my room to pack, to run — God knows where, just away from here. I couldn't face Jake after this. It would be just like old times; he'd lord it over me because he'd finally won. And I certainly couldn't face Father. Maybe in a week or two, but not now.

I'd just reached my room when footsteps pounded behind me. Someone grabbed my shoulder and pulled me around.

It was Jake. "Ted," he said, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You don't have to be," I said, hard. "It's over. You're the winner. You have everything you wanted."

He shook his head. "Not anymore. I told Father I didn't want the company, and that he could shove it up his ass ten ways from Tuesday."

I stared, amazed. "Really?"

"Word for word, I swear!" He laughed. "It felt better than anything I've ever done before."

"That was stupid."

"He picked the wrong one," Jake said simply. "It should've been you. I know that. When you came back, it wasn't because of loyalty to me. It was loyalty to your ideals, to what 'family' stands for. I never could have done that."

Suddenly, I hugged him. I couldn't help myself. It was the only way he wouldn't see my tears.

"I don't want the company," he said again. He hugged me back. "Not like this."

*Like that makes it true*, I thought. He had to be hurting inside.

"I've got to pack," I said. "I'm going to Paradise. At least until Father cuts off my funds. Want to come?"

He grinned. "Sure, Ted. Until he cuts off our funds — or takes us back on our terms. I want to be your partner from now on. We'll run the company together — or not at all."

"Your word on that?"

"My word."

Then for the first time in his life he offered me his hand. I shook it solemnly.

"Thanks, Jake," I said. "You've got a bargain ... partner." □

## Our Next Issue

Our Spring 1993 issue of *Aboriginal* will include an unusual novelette, "Dear Froggy," by regular *Aboriginal* contributor Patricia Anthony. She takes us back to the Victorian era of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Jane Austen, and George Eliot (otherwise known as Mary Ann Evans). Two of Pat's novels will be out early next year as well, *The Conscience of the Beagle*, from First Books, and *Cold Allies*, from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, which also happens to know a good writer when it sees one.

Hard SF writer Doug Franklin will make his third appearance with "Newport's World," a story set in the same AI universe as "Gray Lies," which appeared in the Summer 1992 issue. Chuck Rothman, who made his first *Aboriginal* appearance in the Sept.-Dec. 1991 issue, will give us a look at the zany problems encountered by a crew of explorers trapped on a world where all the food is contaminated with psychotropic drugs in "Natural High."

We'll also have stories by Catherine Mintz ("Enchantment"); by Chet Gottfried ("Two by Two"); and *Aboriginal* regular Howard Hendrix ("At the Shadow of a Dream"). Joining them will be first-time authors Barney Currer with "Ladies' Choice"; Brooks Peck with "In Love with Multi-Woman"; and Alan Kirk "When in Bzook ..."

And we'll have as many more stories as we can fit. And, no, we won't tell you what they are, or who they're by. Buy the issue and see for yourself. Discovery is half the fun.

# Patterns of Little Gods

By Sharan Newman

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

There were hummingbirds in the bottlebrush trees, but it didn't matter a damn.

Carlyle hit the first trunk with his second-best axe and was immediately showered by thin red wisps and whirring wings. He wiped his eyes and continued the work. He judged five trees for the fire. Green and red trees, season them a week or two in this sun and they'd send sparks a hundred miles. Set houses aflame clear to Running and back. And serve them all right it would, too.

The first tree fell, leaving a cloud of birds floating above it. Carlyle grabbed it by the trunk and tossed it into the gully. He went on to the next, leaving the birds to find a new home or burn with the old. Just like the settlers. Idiots. They had less sense than the hummingbirds. The land dried them to tinder, shriveled their skin and cracked their bones, but they hung on, plowing the dust to bedrock and never noticing as the soil blew away.

Carlyle reached for the canteen. The water spilled down his chin, but he made no move to wipe it. He laughed as the drops sizzled and vanished on the ground. He threw the second tree on the pile with the first. Which was worse, Carlyle wondered, to panic because the sky was falling or to ignore the signs that told you it had already crashed?

In Deem, he had heard, they laid the tables every night with china and crystal to eat parched corn soup with no salt. What did they think was happening to them?

The third tree fell.

"Hey, Carlyle!" Everlasting Hollingsword stood grinning by the mound of brush. "Getting late. Think you'll have it all done by Meeting? Why didn't you use the laser?"

Carlyle stared him down easily. Everlasting never could look at a man straight on. His grin dissolved.

"Well, if you don't make it, try dead-eyeing Angst McPherson for explanation. See what he gives you back!"

Everlasting stomped off, back to his steel and stone house where his dried-up family gathered straw to set on the wind for Running Faire. Where all his waking hours were spent staring at the empty sky.

Carlyle started on the fourth tree.

In the lower field, Myhert Rainere pulled the last lere corn husks from the stalks. She laid them gently in her basket. They mustn't be bruised, shaken in the combines. The last of the season, she would wring enough moisture from them, enough to dampen a handkerchief, enough to glaze a cup, enough to touch Carlyle's dry eyelids. Dry and cruel eyes, like mirrors that distorted her pity. His voice, rough as crumbled sandstone, harsh with pain. She loved him with an intensity that made every movement an act of will.

The cornhusks crackled as she carried them home. Myhert concentrated on walking, breathing, holding the basket. Carlyle had passed her door this morning, his axe on his shoulder, his face turned away. And there was a meeting tonight.

She stumbled on a pebble in the road. Lift your foot, you stupid girl! There, now she had lost the rhythm of her breath. She gasped and choked, forcing down the aching. Concentrate. Inhale. Harder! Exhale carefully. Again, Myhert, and again. And don't drop the corn.

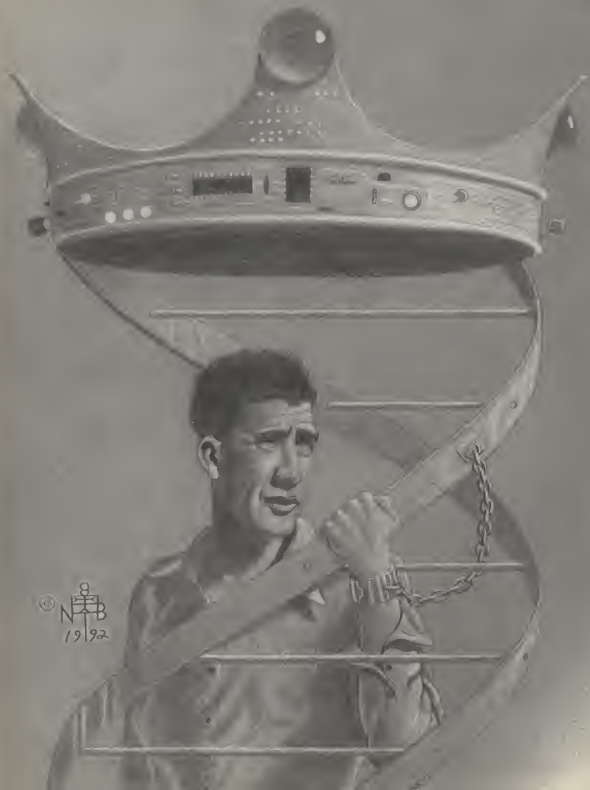
A hundred and twelve steps to her doorway. Myhert leaned against the lintel. The steel was pitted, worn down. She pressed her forehead into the metal. It burnt. Good. Outside pain distracts so that the body goes into automatic for a while.

She set the basket in the coolest corner of the room. It was too much. Her hands began to shake and she sank onto the couch.

There's no more water left in the valley, she thought. He's cutting down the bottlebrush trees.

The fifth tree lay with the others, a huge tangle in the dried-up creek bed. Carlyle smiled and up-ended the canteen above it. The last drops fell onto the dying wood. Carlyle closed his eyes and threw the empty bottle as hard and as far as he could. He stood over the trees, fists clenched. Then he walked back to the village. His axe lay abandoned in the brush.

The fuchsia and turquoise stripes blinked redundantly in the clear night. Everyone knew about the meeting. It had been broadcast all week on the short-wave. They had come from Deem and Running and even from Endswest. Myhert was there and Everlasting with his wife, Jane, and the three



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oldest children. They crowded in, rasping against each other, scrabbling for the chairs.

Angst McPherson stood on the dais. Beside him was a throne, high-backed, cushioned in worn red velvet. A platinum crown lay on the seat. Angst held up his hands and the room grew silent.

"There has been no rain for two years now," he began sententiously. "Last year we had no winter at all. The water reserves of the valley are almost gone."

"So tell us something we don't know, Angst," a voice jeered. There were murmurs of agreement.

Angst cleared his throat and glared at the audience.

"It's time for the King to come."

The crowd gave a collective sigh. Relief, fear, guilt ... anticipation.

"Saw Carlyle today," Everlasting spoke. "I imagine he was getting ready to be King."

Angst nodded. "He knows the time's come, just like his father did."

"That's no good reason!" Carosel Marks from Deem stood up. "Carlyle won't do. The blood's worn too thin. I've known him twenty years now. The man's anti-social. He swears and sneers and I hear he smokes. He doesn't know his duty. He doesn't even have a family. What kind of King is that?"

"True, all true!" Sevenwit Graham added her piece. "Birth's not everything. There's plenty here's got royal blood from a ways back. It's not like being King takes real Talent. Why can't we choose him, get someone who wants the job, who'll treasure the honor, like we do the Speakers and Watchers?"

There were shouts of agreement and anger. Angst called for order.

"Carlyle's got it in him to be King," he said firmly. "He knows his job just like Carosel here, or Hyland, or Lin. Being King is just as much a Talent as anyone's and just as inescapable. How many of you went by the gully on your way here? The wood's there now, drying. Carlyle did that and he'll do the rest as needed. Trust me. I knew his father. Ornery and mean the both of them, but they come through."

"So where's he at tonight?" Carosel interrupted.

Angst shrugged. "Doesn't matter. He'll be here for the coronation, that's enough. Now, there'll be no more discussion. It's settled. Let's move on to new business. Jason Logrym, don't you have a report on the plans for the Faire at Running?"

Myhert slipped out as the discussion continued. She never went to the Faïres.

King.

Now it had been said. She had hoped, but that was stupid. They hadn't needed one since Carlyle's father had died, twenty years ago. They had done just fine on their own. But now the valley was dying and Angst the Watcher said it was time.

But why did it have to be Carlyle? The women

were right. He had no Talent that she'd ever seen, except for the ability to ruin the rhythm of her body.

Myhert drove home through deserted streets. Everyone was still meeting. Good. She left the light on in the front room with a disc playing. Then she went to the bedroom and locked herself in.

Carlyle took a tattered roll from the shelf. He opened it and held it up to the light, squinting at the tiny lines. Then he set it on the reader, turning the rusty crank by hand to make the tape go through. He read a few minutes, then swore and ripped it out again. As he reached for the next one there was a soft thump from the far corner of the underground room. He froze.

"Blas't it!" a voice whispered. "Come on! Breathe, girl!"

"Myhert!"

Myhert choked on an inrush of air and started coughing. Finally Carlyle came over and pounded her back until she pushed him away.

"How did you get in here?" he asked. "No one but me has the key."

"Tunnel," she swallowed. "My father dug it."

"Why would your father want to dig into the archives?"

Myhert stood up and dusted off her skirts. "He didn't. He thought he was going to the Blaine place. He and Persis Blaine were ... and he wanted to get in without being seen while Oscar was working in the fields. He was three degrees off and came out here."

Carlyle's lips twitched. "It must have been a disappointment."

"I suppose so. Persis took up with Grateful Meadows soon after and Dad was stuck with a tunnel in his closet."

"And why are you here?"

Myhert faltered. "I wanted to look something up."

"You read?"

"Yes, and do sums," she retorted.

"Sorry," he said. "I mean, you can read the old script."

She nodded but didn't say anything more. Carlyle waited. Myhert stared at him, trying to remember how to blink. Finally, he turned away.

"So, now that you're here, maybe I can help you. What did you want to find?"

"I want to know how the King's Talent works."

She watched his head jerk and his back stiffen. It took him eighty-seven seconds to answer.

"It just so happens I can tell you quite a lot about that."

He pulled out a history disc and reeled it onto the reader.

"When they sent the first colonists out here, no one bothered to tell them that the weather of Gnos-sos comes in cycles. Twenty, thirty years, sometimes

as long as a hundred, the water's there. The crops are abundant. But then ..."

"The air changes," Myhert finished. "The land dries up. I know."

"We all know now, but our ancestors didn't," Carlyle spun the tape viciously so that it cracked lengthwise. "Those bastards sent a bunch of farmers and a few technicians out here with a couple of simple computers and basic machines. They didn't send one person who knew how to build or even repair those machines."

"I know that, too," Myhert said carefully. "It was a lucky thing that the families developed their Talents."

"Wasn't it, though?" Carlyle's eyes glittered with scorn. "Just a miraculous coincidence that the Graham women all had hair that matched the wiring in the computers. Or that the Lin men could spit a chemical that kept the solar panels working."

"What else c ... c ... could it be?" Myhert asked. Damn. She shouldn't have looked at him.

"An experiment."

"What?"

"A nice, controlled scientific exercise, Myhert. The whole colony is a goddamn bunch of laboratory animals."

"Where did you hear about laboratories?" Myhert

asked.

Carlyle started. "Where did you?"

Myhert sighed. "You never asked what my Talent was, Carlyle. I'm the recorder. All these numbers and ratios live in my mind. I count and calculate and keep track. For all I know, I'm sending data back even now."

His hands reached for her neck. She didn't move.

"Then you can change it," he said. His hands hung limp in the space between them.

"No, I can't even understand it," she said. "Don't you think I've tried? Since the day I realized what I was for." That wasn't true. It was when she had first suspected what he was for.

He sat down and buried his face in his folded arms.

"I'm a man, damn it," he muttered. "I won't obey some mindless program someone stuck in my blood five hundred years before I was born."

Her whole body ached to stroke his head, draw the tautness from his neck. Her fingers forgot how to bend.

"They thought they had the perfect solution," she said. "Machines break down. Look at the film readers here, people forget how to fix them. Civilizations crumble. Maybe they saw it happening around them on Earth. Only in ourselves can we carry

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eternal information. So they put it in our hair and nails and eyes, anywhere. We didn't need to remember. Our bodies do."

"Then they should have taken away our souls," Carlyle said. "If we were going to be machines, we shouldn't have to feel."

In the long silence, she forced her hand out toward him. He watched as it pushed back of its own accord.

"Do you know, Myhert," he said. "Since the drought began, every woman in town has offered herself to me. Everyone but you. What ever it is they put in me knows I haven't made any replacement parts. It's drawing them, but apparently not you. Myhert Rainere, what do your numbers say you were programmed for?"

She drew herself up, trying to hold dignity around her, to cover what she was about to say.

"If anything, Carlyle Dieudonné, I was made to avoid you. The closer I am to you, the more it hurts. Loving you is killing me."

It was not a demand. It was a statement of fact. Carlyle took it as such.

"Anyway," she added quickly. "The experiment isn't perfect. Look at Everlasting. Do you really think he was generated by some Master Plan? Who would waste their time creating him?"

"That's true," Carlyle turned back to the reader. "But someone wasted their time creating me to save him."

She didn't move. He spoke without looking up.

"Feeding more data to your supervisors?"

"No. At least, I don't know," She circled around him, keeping her distance, to the darkest corner of the room. "Remember, I'm part of the experiment, too."

She knelt by the lowest shelf, reached far in the back and pulled out a small, gray box.

"I found this years ago," she handed it to him. "It's about the King, why he was so hard to program. There are symbols in here I can't figure out; strange formulae. But, maybe there's something in you that can understand them. Did you know your mother was a Recorder?"

"No!"

"I don't think they're supposed to mate with Kings," she grimaced. "I remember her. When I told her what I was, she cried. Now I know why."

Then Myhert circled the room again and vanished into the tunnel, sliding a wall board shut behind her.

Carlyle stared at the blank wall, then at the box in his hand. Myhert! Strange, aloof, compelling Myhert. Had she just handed him salvation, or was it just another part of the test?

Carefully he took the brittle tape from the box and threaded it onto the reader.

Everlasting and Jane were still outside the Grange, talking with Angst McPherson. Carlyle would rather have waited until they were gone but Jane sensed his nearness and turned with a small, hopeful smile.

"Say, Carlyle, we were just talking about you," Everlasting grinned. Did he know what his wife was thinking? "Wood's just about dry, I'd say."

"Another week, Everlasting."

"There's not much left to eat, Carlyle."

"I know it as well as anyone."

Jane tugged at her husband's arm. "Don't make him mad," she hissed.

Everlasting backed off. "One more week," he muttered as Jane dragged him away. "I expect a decent coronation, even from you."

"Don't mind him," Angst said. "He's got kids to feed."

"Yeah, I suppose he doesn't have any more choice than I do," Carlyle said. "He was born an idiot. You have everything ready, Angst?"

The old Watcher nodded. "The Deem mixed choir wanted to do all the music, but I knew they'd botch it. I gave 'em the recessional. Endswest has a string quartet that'll play you in. The rest just fell into place. We'll do it proper, Carlyle. You won't be ashamed."

"Fine," Carlyle started to leave. Angst stopped him.

"There's one more thing. Folks have been worrying."

"I know. I hear them. No wife, no child. It's not natural."

Angst let his own worry show. "Not natural? It's impossible! What happens when the next drought comes?"

"Damned if I care."

"But you must!"

Carlyle shook his head and left, back to the archives and the arcane tapes. They made no sense to him, all the twisted lines, but he refused to give up. What had been done, had been done by humans. There had to be a way for him to undo it. But, if not, no child of his would survive to play this out again. He'd beaten them there, at least.

Myhert!" She started awake. The sound came from the closet. She knew who it was by the way her hands froze in the air above the quilt. She pressed them down, forcing them against her stomach to push out the breath.

"Come in, Carlyle."

The closet door opened. "I found something," he said. "Where are you? Where's the light?"

"I can't move. There's a switch behind you."

"Never mind. I'll follow your voice."

He sat on the edge of the bed and took her rigid

hand.

"I'm the culmination," he snorted. "I was so hard to build that they had to send along a little notice explaining how brilliant they were. You know what the King's Talent is?"

"Everyone does."

"Right," he shuddered. "But the compounds were infinitely more complex than just replacing a battery. They couldn't just be localized in nail clip-pings."

His anger poured over her.

"For all the trouble they went to, they could have built a thousand machines to do what the King does. But it was a game, a challenge. They had to fit it all inside a man. Never mind what else was in him already."

"I've often wondered how they could be such fools," Myhert said. "To only make one King. People are so fragile. I remember when you fell while working on the radio tower. You would have died if Angst hadn't caught you."

"But he did," Carlyle took her other hand. "Now I know what the Watchers are for."

Her fingers were stiff and icy. They quivered in his grasp, as if counting.

"If it's all chemicals," she said. "We could learn to synthesize them, maybe combine Talents, the way we do to make wine."

She was trying to think, not to notice how his warmth was settling into her.

"Myhert, they didn't send instructions. All they sent was a man. I'm all there is, Myhert. There's no way out. And I'm too tired to hunt for one any more."

Something sizzled against her cheek. He was crying. God it hurt. Every nerve in her protested. Carlyle was there in the dark beside her, wrapped in terrible isolation and his tears were cutting patterns into her face. Yet her body didn't want her to help him. Why? What else had she been programmed for?

"Carlyle?"

She made her hands move, forced her arms to close around him until he lay against her, the tears collecting in the hollow of her throat.

"Myhert, I can't stop it. There's some horrible thing inside me that insists I must be King, that's driving me to it. Myhert! Help me. I don't want to be a machine!"

"You're not!" Softer. "You're not. No more than any of us. Those creators were wrong. We can't be machines. Machines don't care."

Machines didn't have arms to grip you as if you were the last safe stop before the fall to Hell. Myhert wondered if she could survive the agony. What could she do? How could your heart love someone beyond all reason and your body refuse to admit it? The darkness reeked of despair.

Her skin was so cool. She lay beneath him, still as marble, but soft. Her fingers made tiny circles on the back of his neck. Carlyle was sick with the shame of coming to her like this, begging for comfort. What had he expected of her? The coronation was tomorrow. He would be there. Nothing could stop it.

Her nightgown was thin as gauze. Through it the length of her body pulled at the heat, the anger in his. He felt her muscles relax. Slowly her legs parted and he slid between them.

"Myhert?"

"Yes."

"I swore I wouldn't do this."

But she could feel him fumbling with his belt. His knuckles dug into her stomach. Fear pushed back.

"Something in me doesn't want us to be together, Carlyle. We're going against the plan. It's taking all the energy in me to hold you."

His hands moved under the nightgown, raising it past her waist. She forced her hips to tilt, her legs to circle him.

"Carlyle, whatever they wanted us to do, I won't. I choose to love you now. Help me."

He meant to stop. He had fought it so long. But she was all around him, like flowing water. He didn't care if he drowned.

Myhert knew she couldn't respond properly. There were too many things to keep track of. Her heart beat too quickly, then slowed. She couldn't even prepare for the pain. She could only hold on and hope it would be all right.

He hurt her. She screamed but he was too far beneath the surface to hear. It seemed as if all his suffering were pouring into her. His bitterness flooded through her.

"If this is what you meant me for, after all, you ancient bastards," she hissed. "Just another one of your tricks, I will still find a way to defeat you. You won't have him."

"Myhert!" he cried and collapsed against her shoulder.

They lay drenched in sweat and tears until the night air sucked off the moisture and left them dry and chill.

There any wine left, Jane?" Everlasting Hol-lingsword asked as he tied his cravat. "Damn. Blasted thing never will lie right."

"Enough," Jane replied. "A bottle each. The fermentation machine should be going again by Sunday. No use to cut my hair to rewire it until there's water. We'll have a new batch by the end of the month."

"If Carlyle Dieudonné comes through," Everlasting gave up on the tie. "Here, do this for me. I don't care what Angst says. He'll try to sneak out of it. A man like that can't be trusted with such respon-

sibility."

Jane sighed and tweaked the cravat straight. "It's true. Maybe his father married too young or too old. Carlyle and he were awfully close. It was Gratian Dieudonné's becoming king that made Carlyle so strange."

"Huh," Everlasting started working on his hair. "Carlyle was always strange. And I don't like the way he's been holed up in the archives, either. I'll bet he's trying to come up with some old law says we can elect a king after all."

"Might not be a bad idea. Save your trouble, Everlasting. That cowl of yours will never lie flat. There's others who'd be willing to make it rain if Carlyle'd just tell them the secret. I don't believe for a minute there's a Talent to it."

Everlasting grimaced into the mirror. "Never happen. Arrogant bastard. Wish I knew what he was up to, though."

Myhert rubbed her eyes. The odd script and the wobbly reader were making her dizzy.

"Did you find something?" Carlyle tried to keep from hoping too much.

"Not yet."

"We've been through all of them twice." He turned off the reader light. "They didn't send anything to tell us how to undo what they had done. They were too proud of having created us. It's no use, Myhert. The ceremony starts at noon."

"Carlyle, we can't give up!"

"There's nothing else to do."

She went to him, held him fiercely, willing him not to go. All those years she had spent hurting whenever he was around. Now three steps away from him and she was starved for the feel of his skin. One victory, at least.

"Maybe the answer isn't in here," she said. "But the key is. If we could just figure out the formulae, we might be able to make rain with machines. Then your Talent would never be needed."

Carlyle stood up, still keeping her close. "Maybe we could, if we had started twenty years ago. If the whole community had worked on it. But no one did. After all, there I was, dumb and handy, waiting around until needed."

"Right. Just like a machine or a mule," Myhert spoke tightly. "But you're neither. So why do it? You don't have to, any more than I had to spend my life running from you. Stay with me. I'll hide you in the tunnel. Tonight we'll run away, into the mountains. We'll find a place to start the research and send them their water from there."

"When Myhert?"

"In a year, ten years. What does it matter?"

Carlyle sighed. "A year. By then Deem and Running will be drifting sand. In ten years even Endswest will be desiccated."

"It's their own fault." Myhert looked away.

"For believing what we were taught to believe? For being good laboratory subjects? Anyway, I don't think I could hide. I'm not as strong as you are. I can feel myself now, being pulled to finish the job."

"But you are the job, Carlyle!" The words were sniffled from somewhere near his shirt button. "And I love you."

"Myhert. I'm sorry. I've done a terrible thing to you."

That brought her back. He almost smiled. Myhert had fought too many years to give in to self-pity now. She looked him square in the eye.

"So you have, Carlyle Dieudonné. But since you have, you might as well do it once more. We've a couple of hours yet."

He did smile then.

The crowd in front of the meeting house was excited, reverential and getting impatient. The Endswest string quartet had played their entire repertoire twice. The day was the hottest yet. Children and puppies sat panting in the shade of the building. The faces of the women were streaked with melted make up and the men boiled inside dress coats.

"It's time, Angst!" Sevenwit croaked. "Where the hell is Carlyle?"

Those with energy left echoed her.

Angst was getting nervous, himself. He had gone to Carlyle's home at ten, but the king designate hadn't been there. He had checked the gully where the bottlebrush trees waited. All the kings had been odd, maybe because their Talent was so comprehensive, but he'd never heard of one who had missed the coronation.

"Another fifteen minutes," he told the crowd.

I won't go to that inane coronation," Myhert told him.

"Good. I'll feel enough of a fool," he answered. "But please, be there afterwards. I'll need you then."

She nodded. "I should have tied you up to keep you here."

"It wouldn't work," he said. "I'd have killed myself trying to escape. Myhert, don't hate me."

"I couldn't. But I hate them. All those smug little meddlers with our lives."

"I'm too tired even for that," he said. "They were just people. They could only see a little way into the dark. Just like us."

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she told him. "I'm going to try to find a way to break this. There must be one."

"Good. You'll do it, I know."

Casual conversation, standing at the door. Nice weather. Let me straighten your collar. Pity we couldn't change things. Maybe next time. And inside they both teetered on the edge of shrieking madness.

Carlyle finally opened the door and stepped outside. His body shook a second. Then he started down the road. Myhert shut the door behind him and went to her room to scream and put on her good dress.

There was a sigh of relief and a few ragged cheers when Carlyle entered the meeting house. Endswest quartet played him in with the traditional march. They couldn't keep the beat. Angst McPherson gestured them quiet, then held out his hands to Carlyle.

"I told them you'd be here," he broke the ceremony to announce.

"You knew I would," Carlyle muttered. "What choice do I have?"

"Yes, well," Angst continued. He raised his arms, showing great rings of sweat. "Let the coronation begin!"

It wasn't an elaborate ritual. It had always been too hot for speeches. A few words of thanks, a benediction from the Watcher. The heavy platinum crown placed on his head. The procession. The altos of the Deem mixed choir were a half tone sharp.

Carlyle moved smoothly through it all. No one needed to teach him his role. He had an inborn instinct for it. When they arrived at the gully, Angst removed the crown to save for the next time. A tiny amount of the platinum had rubbed into the pores of his scalp.

The people waited.

Carlyle grit his teeth. Had all the kings felt this fury? Was anger a part of the paradigm? He felt such longing. Was it for Myhert or for what was to come? If only he knew what emotions were his own.

He turned his back on the crowd and stepped into the crisp tangle of the bottlebrush trees. The hummingbirds had gone. Carlyle looked at the sky and damned everything in it, all the way back to Earth. Then slowly, he began to rub his thumbs against his collarbone. Those in the back pushed forward to see.

It took only a minute for the sparks to shoot out from his hands, less for them to catch in the tinder. Within seconds the fire had caught his shirt and crawled up to his hair. Carlyle inhaled deeply, retched and tried again. Better to smother and die without screaming. His father had managed it. He exhaled and caught the fascinated gaze of Everlasting Hollingsword. As usual, Everlasting blinked first. Carlyle grimaced in disgust. It took more than compassion to die for such a man. No wonder they had made sure he had no choice. He threw his head back. His eyes smarted but he couldn't close them yet. He searched through the crowd. Yes, there at the back, standing on a rickety barrel. Myhert! Their eyes met and she didn't flinch. Her tears fell unheeded and unsaved into the dirt.

The wind gusted, swirling the smoke between them. Carlyle again took it into his lungs. The fire Patterns of Little Gods

ate at him from within as well now. Its intensity cut through the anger, the contempt, the bitterness. Nothing was left but flame.

The ashes of his skin rose like the hummingbirds. They danced above the flakes from the bottlebrush trees. They spread across the air and caught the moisture of his blood and body. It formed a cloud that swelled, growing dense and strong until it covered the sky from Running to Deem to Endswest and beyond.

And then Carlyle rained.

The people danced in the warmth until soaked through. That night they had the last of the wine and slept in a contented stupor. In the morning, the vines would be ready again. The cycle was unbroken.

In the dark gully, Myhert sat alone by the glowing pyre.

"Carlyle," she whispered. "I will keep my promise. We will be human beings. This won't ever happen again."

In the darkness, she fled from the valley, into the mountains to record and remember. She carried within her the potential for breaking the pattern set down so long before as well as, unknowing, the seed of the next king. □

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# Dead Sky Eyes

By John W. Randal

Art by Jon Foster

The first dog in could barely talk. It was a big old, mean-lookin cuss, ratty hair worn thin. Patches of rusty metal showed through its hide here and there. Even dogs took a beatin livin out on the Barrens.

Like I said, it couldn't talk too damn good at all. But it didn't need to say much. Two words.

And it said em to me, for Lord's sake.

I jus stood there in Maggie's Saloon, the dry heat of the day settlin in to me like a coat of old sweat. Other folks were hangin around, sipping watered whiskey or playing cards. Christ, I could smell the dog before it even got there.

It stank of old barbed wire and that sharp odor you can catch in the air after a whopper of a lightning storm.

The mutt's mangy shadow led it into the saloon, as it slunk in under the swingin doors.

Doc Pauley dropped his glass — a quick bright crack. Then it was as quiet as church on Sunday. Everybody jus waited.

I watched em all, so sudden white and still.

And the damn dog stepped up to me.

It said those two words in a voice like the fraying creek of Marge Winsor's weathered porch swing.

Man, I tell ya — it tain't a nice thing to find out you're gonna die before your eighteenth birthday.

First thing I did was go see my Ma and Pa. Others maybe would've cut that and hit the booze or practice range right aways. Some I seen jus get loco, snappin like taut twine when they was called out. And I don't mean to tell ya that I was, all-a-sudden, stoely-eyed and ice-veined, like The Kid in those dime novels or somethin. I was scared blue, right enough. But my Pa had always been a big man when it came to fear. He'd cried, he told me, cried like a baby when he lost his fingers down at the foundry, after his accident.

The thing was, he said, it was all right to cry. But, by God, men *continued*. That was the measure. An animal folded up and died — men continued, movin' around their misfortune.

I saw my Pa's face real clear, when the dog barked out those two black words. And man, I wanted to cry then.

I'd been there when old Weaser had got his callin. The poor geezer had wet himself right then and there. No one razed him about it — but you could

see their eyes.

So I didn't cry, or lose my head. I jus swallowed, left my drink, and headed out. A man continues.

And, besides, Mrs. Lathem's daughter Tori was there.

I swear, I don't know if death or a pretty girl can make a man act more a fool, or bring out the best in him.

Damned if I know.

But I was cool, for what it was worth.

Pa's eyes crinkled up around the edges and the well-scrubbed floorboards creaked as he rocked a bit. Ma jus cried and clapped her hands to her mouth, the tears fair spittin out.

We all stood like that, for who knows how long.

Then Pa embraced me, strong and short, and held me back, sayin, "Now you know what y'all gotta do, son."

I nodded. My head was almost scary in the way it was so empty. Just a buzzin inside.

Pa's hands tightened on my arms.

"You git you gun. You go to the range. You practice, son. Hear me?" His voice got a little frayed then too. "You got a chance at this, everyone does. *But you gotta be here.*"

At first no words would come outta my dry mouth. Then I swallowed and managed, "Yes, sir." I sounded like I was ten years younger.

Fear has a way of rollin back those years, so that you can remember those baby-scares real well.

"Everyone has a chance," Pa repeated.

I nodded.

Two words from a dog: "You," and "Showdown." It was just two words from a rusting mutt. And everybody had a even chance.

But I'd never — ever — heard tell of *anybody* beating the Desperado.

The town was bone quiet, as I headed for the practice range. The Colt revolver was as heavy as a ton of wet brick in my holster. It bounced on my left hip like it was five feet long. And I didn't feel like The Kid, all full of fire and cold menace. I didn't feel strong or dangerous at all.

I felt like a baby, playin with big toys.

And I saw the Desperado out by McCoy's General



Store, where he always was.

The sight made me jump like a rabbit — like that gray-skinned scarecrow had somehow just popped up there. I guess when you see something all the time, day by day, year by year, you jus stop seein it.

Now though, I was seeing the Desperado with new eyes.

He was tall, real tall. Ben, the blacksmith, was a big man, about six foot four. But the Desperado topped him by a good two feet. His once black hat was speckled gray, as were his narrow shoulders, with bird droppings. And the rest of his clothes were worn thin and raggedy — like the dog's splitting hide.

But there weren't no metal peepin through the Desperado's wind-grayed skin. He was real meat, sure enough. Once, Hardcase Joe had winged him with a shot, when Joe had been called out. The Desperado had bled like anyone else. He could die — everyone had a chance.

But Hardcase Joe had gone down, like everyone else who stepped into the street with the Desperado. And the dogs had taken him away.

I stared for a long time at the Desperado's sleepin face. He stood there like a post, not movin a bit. Dried leaves and colorless grit were caked in the folds of his coat. A dead tumbleweed was tangled around his boots. The last time he'd moved was long months ago.

But the gun in his worn holster was as clean as spit. And as black as a moonless night.

**B**ut you could *run*, Jimmy!" Tori Lathem exclaimed.

I tell ya, it may be the most rock-stupid thing you ever heard, but the tight edge of concern in her voice gave me a flush of pride. We hardly talked, 'cept at church gatherings. But she'd come to me at the range, soft skirts swishin, big blue eyes shiny-wet, and I felt almost good.

Like I said, damn foolish.

The harsh crack of the pistol made us both jump, and my hand bounced halfway up to my head with the recoil. The shot missed by a country mile.

My throat was suddenly very dry again.

"Manny Pedrosa tried to run, back when my Pa was a kid," I said, starin blankly at the spot where my shot had kicked up a puff of dirt behind the row of gleaming bottles.

"The Desperado jus followed him when the time was up. Shot him in the back, and then the dogs ..."

"But—" Tori said, her voice suddenly small. "You're just a year older than me. I mean, we go to school together, and ..."

I looked at her, letting the thick weight of the gun bring my sore arm down.

Tori's pale cheeks were flushed and the fretful breeze had worked a strand of her cornsilk hair free

of its bun. A golden curl lay along her face.

That moment seemed perfect to me, and I tried to like, *draw* it all up into my eyes — so that I'd remember it forever. The light was sharp and clear and everything was quiet, and I was so ... *there*. It was almost like a dream.

"Jimmy ..." she quavered.

And we hugged then, real tight and close. And it wasn't like kids playin behind the schoolhouse, or like one of the poker players and a Saloon floozie.

This was somethin else. Somethin ... pure.

**T**ori was the only one who'd come to the practice range. Everybody else was inside, countin their blessins, I guess. I didn't hold it against none of them — hell, I'd done it enough times myself.

I could imagine clear enough what they was sayin. The hushed, quiet voices. The tension. Nobody would be getting drunk, nobody would be doin anything. Just waiting.

The time before the Showdown was always left entire to the one that got called out, like everyone was afraid of usin up the poor bastard's few remaining hours themselves.

And I was kinda glad that Ma and Pa hadn't come along. Pa knew this was something for me alone.

So I practiced, shot after shot. After a bit, the gun didn't jump so much, and a couple of those green glass bottles exploded into spinning glitters. Tori jus stood by, watching the targets. We didn't talk.

I'd draw and fire, the hot snap jerking my left wrist. Sometimes one of those square bottles would get blasted away, sometimes I'd only hit the dirt behind the rack.

I worked at it for hours, till I was soaked through with sweat and my hand was heavy and numb.

Tori's cool touch finally stopped me. We sat there in the dirt together and she held me.

In the end, I could hit about six out of ten targets.

**M**adame Covie has come down to the Saloon's porch," Tori told me.

I nodded, carefully reloading my pistol. I think Madame Covie had been in town forever, she was like a landmark. A huge fat woman, big and puffy pale. She only came out of her room in Warrenson's hotel when there was a Showdown. She sat on the Saloon's porch and watched from her mahogany chair, like some sort of doughy judge.

Tradition, I guess.

I'd have to go see her — before I went to see the undertaker.

A man has to *continue*.

**J**immy Pointer," Madame Covie said. Her voice seemed to echo up from the meaty bulk of her flabby neck.

"Yes," I replied. Folks were gatherin now, linin

Dead Sky Eyes



the streets. Tori stood next to me. "I got called out this mornin'."

Madame Covie nodded. Her face was paper pale and her black eyes looked like holes.

"You're a good young man, I know your family." Her gaze roved over me. I'd washed up before I'd come out onto the main street. So least I was clean, but I was probably as pale as her. Again she nodded.

"You've got a strong heart. And an even chance."

I bowed slightly to her. Up closer, her skin smelled faintly of apples. Picturing Madame Covie daintily applying toilet water to herself with those big blunt hands made me feel like this all was a dream. Like it was so unreal that I could just blink it all away.

Then I caught some movement out of the corner of my eyes and turned. More dogs were gatherin at both far ends of the street. Ragged, glass-eyed things, just millin around in two growing clusters. They didn't look like much at all.

They never did — until after the Showdown.

With another nod at Madame Covie, and a look to Tori, I left the porch and headed for the undertaker.

Silent faces watched me walk down the street.

My eyes were watchin the dogs.

Only somethin like them could live out in the Barrens.

That huge stretch of crusty sand and cracked rock to the west of town was Bad to the core. It'd been like that since I was a kid. No one went out there — no one who ever came back, that is.

Sometimes, when the wind was just right, you could smell things burning out there — so far away that you couldn't see the smoke. The scent was odd and itchy, and it drove the horses and livestock crazy.

I saw a cow smell those distant burnings once and just dash its head against a fence post. Till the wild-eyed thing was dead.

And there were those razor-thin lines of light that flickered along that flat horizon in the spring, and the muffled booms and rumbles. Once, the whole town had been tossed out of bed by a wailing screech comin from the Barrens.

I was just a toddler then, but Pa had told me that they'd all saw, honest-to-God, a big rusted dart come flyin out of the Barrens that night. High in the air, trailing smoke and steam, the contraption went.

The dart crashed way out on Dawson's ranch, what they call gow-pit gulch, now. Nobody who goes there lives very long afterward.

But the dogs live out there, in the Barrens.

And that's where they take the losers of the Showdown.

The undertaker's office was cool and dim. Mr. Bennings was there, waiting for me.

Dead Sky Eyes

"It won't take but a minute, Jimmy," Mr. Bennings said, as he got out his tape measure. I couldn't tell if he was talkin about the measurin or the dyin. I guess it didn't matter.

I stood in his quiet, clean room and let the short man measure me. And right then it all came real to me. When the dog had talked to me in the Saloon, when I'd told Ma and Pa, when I'd went to the range — it hadn't really sunk in.

But here, gettin silently measured, it was crystal clear. I stood there and knew I was gonna die.

That feelin isn't what I'd call scary. It's not a fear-type of thing — but, in the Lord's name, I pray that you never have to feel it yourself.

The sure knowin that you're livin your last hours is a blank desolation.

That's the only way I can put it.

The measurin was soon done, and I realized that tears were runnin down my face. I wasn't ashamed, what I'd just realized was just too big inside me.

And, besides, Mr. Bennings never looked at my face.

I watched him put away his tape, make some notations in his little black book, and then fetch out the putty.

He took a thick, milk-white sheet of the clay-like stuff, from a large tin on his neat worktable. "Close your eyes and mouth for a moment, son," he said in his bland voice. I did as he told me.

The putty was warm and faintly oily, as he molded it over my face. Mr. Bennings smoothed it swiftly on, making a clear impression. Once removed from the tin, the putty began to harden. The smell it gave off was faintly fruity.

Mr. Bennings carefully removed the putty mask and set it aside. He then made moldings of my hands. It was all for the dummy.

Every Showdown loser had been buried up on Preacher Hill, with a full Christian service — even though the real bodies were forever lost to the dogs and the Barrens. Tradition. Nobody, as far as I knew, had any say so as to what the town would do if the Desperado died in a Showdown. Somehow, I couldn't see the reverend prayin over an eight-foot coffin. Just couldn't see it at all.

As Mr. Bennings worked, he absently pushed up his sleeves. There was a network of dark dots and bruised lines in the crook of his right arm. For some reason those blemishes reminded me of the Barrens. And when he saw me lookin, Mr. Bennings quickly pulled down his white sleeves.

We didn't say another word to each other till his job was done.

I stepped out onto the street at five minutes to noon.

The sun was a hard smear of pale yellow and everything seemed coated in dust. I felt cold dribbles

of sweat tricklin down my sides under my shirt. My face was as dry as the air.

I walked down the middle of the street, toward the Desperado. Folks had come out now. They lined both sides of Main Street — a deep and utterly silent crowd. I saw Ma and Pa, together, on Doc Pauley's front step. And there was Tori, cryin silently.

There were two big packs of dogs now. One at each end of the street. I could see wire and rusted springs and metal through some of their fraying hides.

And the still figure of the Desperado steadily grew, like a tall black post wrapped with barbed wire. He hadn't wakened yet.

I passed slowly by the Saloon, my dusty boots kicking up small puffs of dirt but making little noise. The day was just swallowing up all the sound.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, I smelled Madame Covie's apple perfume. She watched me blankly, her eyes like two holes punched in a white sheet. I took another breath.

Then I stopped. With a jitterin hand, I rubbed my cheek. There was somethin ...

And the Desperado shivered.

A dull sigh ran through the crowd and all eyes swiveled to the Desperado, as he shook himself and stepped from out of the tumbleweed tangle around his thin ankles.

His eyes opened and the bleached denim irises locked onto me. He moved smoothly, easy — not stiff at all after all this time. His footfalls kicked up no dust, as he strode into the center of the street, his eyes never blinking, never leaving mine. There he swiveled a bit and stopped.

Facing me.

I couldn't look away from him, from those dead sky eyes.

His expression was calm, almost serene. I'd seen that same expression as he idly let Hardcase Joe take shot after wild shot at him. It never changed, even when Joe had winged him. The Desperado had just waited, drawing it out, emotionlessly taunting Hardcase Joe. And then, languidly shooting the trembling man through the eye with an almost idle hand.

Like I said, I saw that expression before. But I'd never had it turned on me. And what I saw in it was beyond my blank desolation. It was beyond *anything*.

But I had a chance, didn't I? Maybe not an even one, but a chance.

A small bead of sweat trickled down the side of my face. And I smelled it again.

Down the street, a dog howled like a tin whistle.

"Draw," said the Desperado.

The smooth-worn wooden grips of the pistol slapped against my clammy palm. I pulled the gun free, the motion seeming to take forever. The steel barrel made a soft, hissing sound as it slipped free

of the holster.

And those dead sky eyes never blinked, never wavered, as my hand came up — and up. And I turned.

And shot Madame Covie, as she sat in her chair, on the porch of Maggie's Saloon.

A neat red hole puffed out in the fleshy side of Madame Covie's putty-pale neck. The second bullet splintered a post by her head. The third hit her square in the chest.

I kept firing until the gun clicked empty. Someone screamed, high and flutterin. Sharp blue smoke curled from the gun's barrel and cylinder.

Madame Covie creaked. That was the only word for it. The sound was so bad that it hurt your ears and made your head feel all wrong inside.

I looked toward the Desperado.

His black gun was pointed directly at my face. The dogs were milling uncertainly.

To my left, Madame Covie jerked from side to side in her mahogany chair. Then she started to stand. There was blood everywhere.

She stepped down from the porch. That horrible creaking was interrupted for moment by a thick animal grunt.

Other people were screaming now. Angry voices echoed back and forth.

Madame Covie walked slowly, ponderously, toward me. Her blood pattered into the dust at her feet in a steady red shower.

The Desperado was watching her, his gray face bemused but still utterly, implacably calm.

Halfway to me, Madame Covie dropped to her thick knees. Her wide mouth gaped empty. Her flabby white hands crept up to her heavy breasts. Then she fell face down in the dusty street. Her blood splattered my left boot.

The uproar from the townsfolk went on, but now it was just a muffled sound in my head. I watched the Desperado.

If I was wrong, I deserved to die. And maybe I'd die anyways. But I had a chance.

He looked from the huge woman to me, his gun still aimed at my face. The dogs crept closer down the street, their steps oddly uncertain.

For an endless moment, I looked into the Desperado's washed-out eyes.

Then he smoothly reholstered his gun, turned and walked away. Heading for the Barrens.

As if on cue, the dogs leapt forward and tore at Madame Covie. The cries of outrage to both sides of me mounted. And then choked suddenly off.

Because the real Madame Covie had started to spill out of her ripped putty skin.

I looked straight at it, though I doubt if many of the others did, after a bit. But I *had* to see, you know? I had to be sure. I had to know that I hadn't killed a person.

And what was inside that pale mask definitely wasn't no person. I saw sharp, feather-like quills and parts that looked like they was covered with bits of shiny purple shell. There were arms, too many arms. And far too many eyes. And the mouth, by Jesus, that was by far the worst.

It hurt your head to see it, like her cry had made your ears feel, somehow *wrong*.

The dogs grabbed it ferociously, long metal teeth sinking in. They tossed and flipped the huge bulk like it was as light as a baby. And then they carried it off.

Into the Barrens.

**T**ori and me got hitched bout a month later. We both figured the hell with the bit about takin' your time with life and all that.

Ma and Pa were proud of me, and they eased me through the way everyone pussy-footed around with me for a while. But things got back to normal soon enough. Or almost.

They found Mr. Bennings dead in his office the day after my Showdown. He had a needle full of purplish black stuff stuck into his scarred arm. Nobody wanted to touch it. The thing had that same *wrong* feelin about it.

Finally, two men wrapped him in a sheet, needle and all, and carried him partways out into the Barrens.

The next day his body was gone.

See, he was the one that'd tipped me to Madame Covie. The smell of the undertaker's mask putty and what I thought was Madame Covie's "perfume" was the same. Sweet apples. He'd made her a mask, I guess. So she could hide.

And feed, me and Doc Pauley figured. Feed on the fear and death of the Showdowns. Maybe she even ran them, in a way. I guess we'd never really know for sure. But her and Mr. Bennings were in cahoots. Maybe she supplied him with that horrible stuff that was in his needle.

Honestly, I try not to think on it too much now. That day is over; life continues.

And the Desperado? He never came back either. After the Showdown, he just kept on walkin', disappearin' finally, way out into the heat-shimmer of the Barrens. As for the dogs, well, I guess they went with him.

And I tell you, the thing I jus can't get outta my head—out of that whole big and strange day—was the last look I saw in the Desperado's dead sky eyes.

It was amusement and, I swear, approval. □

## Apocalyptic Jingle

By Darrell Schweitzer

*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,  
bolts and old wiring, rust to rust;  
satellites tumble, their orbits decay —  
who'll mind the store while the master's away?*

*Gone are the people who built the machines.  
Last-minute shoppers are no longer seen,  
who cluttered the malls in that last  
Christmas season  
before Man's extinction, whatever the reason.*

*Come TVs and toasters and major appliances,  
garage doors and autos, come join our alliances:  
Let's clean up the carpets and turn out the lights,  
drive to work daytimes and hurry home nights.*

*We'll sweep and we'll tidy, repair and replace,  
as if we still served the defunct human race.  
Keep Earth as it was when Man was alive —  
who knows when new owners are due to arrive?*

## Congratulations to the 1992 Hugo Award Winners

**Best Novel:** *Barrayer*  
by Lois McMaster Bujold  
**Best Novella:** "Beggars in Spain"  
by Nancy Kress  
**Best Novelette:** "Gold"  
by Isaac Asimov  
**Best Short Story:** "A Walk in the Sun"  
by Geoffrey A. Landis  
**Best Art:** *The Summer Queen*  
by Michael Whelan  
**Best Artist:** Michael Whelan  
**Best Editor:** Gardner Dozois  
**John W. Campbell Award:**  
Ted Chiang

# Light Bodies Falling

## By Sean Williams

### Art by Cortney Skinner

It seems to be a natural law that wherever there are tall buildings people will jump off them. The true statistics of suicide in any modern city are horrifying and, therefore, carefully concealed from the general public; for every one that makes the morning paper, there might be ten or twenty that do not. Kids that think they can fly, old women fed up with life, businessmen with their backs against the wall — all are united by the eternal euphoria of weightlessness, and the mortal smack of flesh on sidewalk.

So, given this history of suicide, Marcus Gardening, a technician for the city roadworks authority, was not entirely surprised to look up from his work one dark morning before dawn to see a man clinging to a ledge, several stories up the side of a nearby office building.

The streets, dark and tomb-like, were unlit by street lights or cars. Under the thrall of an unexpected blackout, the city had become a realm of shadows and silence, shunned by commuters of all kinds. The only souls abroad in this cold wasteland of concrete and glass were technicians, making the most of the inactive circuits, repairing or simply maintaining equipment in preparation for peak-hour five hours away.

He never knew what made him raise his head from the electronic guts of the traffic light he was investigating. Perhaps it was the fact that, spread-eagled and rigid, the man on the building looked uncannily like a crippled black spider, glued to a wall. Marcus was an acute arachnophobe, could sense a spider in a room where none could be seen. Perhaps that was it.

Marcus immediately radioed the central office. The airwaves hissed and spat — unusually noisy for that time of night — as he reported the incident.

"We've got a jumper on Pirie Street," he said, trying to sound casual but feeling sick inside. His partner, Sam Balkai, whose turn it was to stay inside the patrol van while Marcus did the work, looked up from his coffee.

"What?" asked Sam.

"Say again?" said the girl on the radio at central.

"Pirie Street — about number fourteen, I think — Abercrombie & Sons, the sign says. There's a guy standing on a ledge about eight floors up."

Even from that distance, Marcus could tell that 'standing' wasn't the right word. 'Clinging

desperately' might have been more accurate.

Sam stepped out of the warmth of the van to check it out. "Jesus," he whispered, peering upwards. "I remember one guy — you know Fred Dansey? — he was parked in a lane next to the Sheppard Street carpark one morning, eating a pie, when a jumper came down ten stories right in front of the fucking van." Sam smacked one palm into another. "Whack!"

Marcus grimaced, imagining the resulting mess as the jumper alighted gracefully onto the bitumen. All he said was:

"Pie with sauce, right?"

"Heard it before, huh?"

The man on the building shifted a leg slightly, and the resemblance to a spider increased. He seemed to be watching the two men below him. Marcus's spine shivered.

"Request backup — cops or something," said Marcus into the radio. "I'm going to see if I can help him."

"Why?" asked Sam, but Marcus was already on his way towards the building and didn't reply.

"I'll stay here and watch the van, then," said Sam, and went back to his coffee.

The main entrance to Abercrombie & Sons was plate glass, and Marcus smashed it with his shoe. Independently powered alarms wailed as detectors reacted to the sudden movement, but he hardly noticed them. Trying to keep his sense of direction, he ran to a door that said 'Stairs' and began to climb upwards.

At the eighth floor he stopped and left the stairwell. Feeling his way through the darkness, he tried to estimate his location in the building with respect to the man on the ledge. When he reached a door that seemed to open in the right area, he kicked it in. The sparsely-furnished office was lit by faint starlight, ethereal and insubstantial.

There was a window in which he caught a faint reflection of himself: pale and weak, not the sort of person used to committing heroic acts. He looked young, inexperienced, and lonely, which was almost entirely incorrect. He was older than he looked by nearly ten years; his job with the traffic authority was just the latest in a series of failed, unsatisfactory careers. Lonely, though, he undoubtedly was,



and nothing within his power would change that.

He pressed his face against the pane and peered downwards, then to his left. His reckoning had proved accurate; the man clung to the stone facade of the building a metre or so from the office. One thing Marcus did have was a good sense of direction. Raising his shoe again, he smashed the window. Such was his urgency that he overestimated the force required, and the shoe slipped from his grasp, spinning away into the depths beyond. Cursing, he plucked the frame free of splintered glass, and craned his head out into the night air.

The man was larger than he had appeared from the ground — upright he would have topped six and a half feet — and was crowned with a thick mat of black hair; a total contrast to Marcus's five foot eleven and chalky blonde mop. The man appeared to be in his mid-thirties, had a thick moustache, and was amazingly strong — a detail made readily apparent by the fact that there was no ledge on that part of the building. Thick muscles stretched like ropes to hold the man onto the vertical facade, with nothing more than the gaps between stones for handholds.

"Er, hello?" called Marcus, uncertain what to say now that he was actually there. The distance between them was significantly greater than the reach of his arm, so the situation required a strength of persuasion greater than Marcus believed he possessed — but he had to try regardless.

The man looked up at him. "Good evening." His voice was deep and rich — despite the edge of strain — and strangely, but formally accented. Almost British, but not quite. "How nice of you to join me."

"Ah." Marcus looked down, then wished he hadn't. His shoe was a tiny dot on the street far, far below.

"It's a long way down," said the man, smiling sympathetically.

"Yes, it is." Marcus swallowed nervously. "What are you doing out here?"

The man shrugged as much as he was able to, given his awkward position. "Running."

"Running?"

"You can't see it, then?"

Marcus looked around. "See what?"

"Never mind."

The man's eyes shifted briefly to the face of the building on the other side of the street. Marcus looked, but could see nothing but shadowy windows and sepulchral stonemasonry.

"I can't see anything."

"Didn't think you'd be up here if you could. What's your name?"

"Marcus Gardening. And yours?"

"Sion. Sion the Baltic."

"Oh." A strange name, Marcus noted, as peculiar as the man's clothing — which consisted of a thick

leather coat covering a dark uniform of some kind.

"Where am I?" asked the man.

"Sorry?"

"What town is this?"

Marcus couldn't see the relevance of the question — or indeed of the conversation thus far. "Adelaide."

"Doesn't ring a bell. What year?"

"1992."

The man raised his eyebrows. "Anno Domini?"

"Uh, yes."

"Good Lord."

"Look, Mr. Baltic —"

"Not 'Mister.' Just Sion. You wouldn't have a rope handy, by any chance?"

Marcus shook his head. "Sorry."

The man called Sion the Baltic sighed. "Shame. I don't know how much longer I can hang on. My leg is broken, you see."

"Oh. How, um, I mean, how did you get here?"

Sion the Baltic laughed with far more cheer than perhaps his situation warranted, unless he was on drugs, which Marcus did not believe to be the case.

"That's a long story," he said.

"Did you fall?"

"In a sense, yes. Look, I hate to seem rude, but is help on the way?"

"Police." Marcus swallowed, floundering. "Fire brigade too, I would think."

"Army?"

"No, I shouldn't think so."

Sion the Baltic looked down, and then over his shoulder at the opposite building. Again, Marcus could see nothing.

"Time to move on," the man sighed, shifting position as though preparing to leap.

"Wait!" shouted Marcus in alarm. "Don't jump!"

Sion the Baltic paused, looked up at him. "Pardon?"

"Maybe — maybe I can help?"

"How?" The raised eyebrow said it all.

"Tell me about it. There's no need to kill yourself, no matter how bad things might seem at the moment." He was filled with an overwhelming need to see this strange person to safety, far outweighing the portion of his mind that told him not to get involved.

Sion the Baltic laughed. "Oh, I see. You mean 'don't jump' in the falling-to-my-death sense, as opposed to ... yes. Well, no need to worry, my fellow, although I appreciate your concern. I do intend to jump — I may as well, considering my fingernails can only last so long — but not to my death." He frowned. "Not literally, anyway."

Marcus tried to comprehend, but failed. "I don't understand."

"Don't blame you. Just assume, if it'll make you feel any better, that I won't die when I let go of this building. Okay?"

"Not really." Sirens were sounding, drawing closer. Marcus spotted Sam far below; his partner waved encouragingly and gave a thumbs-up.

"Incidentally," said Sion the Baltic, "why did you try to stop me? From jumping, I mean."

"Well, I couldn't just let you kill yourself, could I?"

"Why not?"

"I ... I don't know. Should I have let you jump?"

"No, but people don't do that sort of thing where I come from."

"And where's that?"

"I really don't think you'd believe me."

Four police cars screeched to a halt on the street below, closely followed by a fire engine and an ambulance. Sion the Baltic tried to look down past his stomach and lost the toehold of his one good leg. Marcus instinctively reached out to offer a hand — even though he couldn't reach — but the big man scrambled for grip without looking for help. Grinding the knee of his broken leg into a crack, he forced the sole of his other boot into a line of mortar until it was sufficiently anchored to support his weight. In this new awkward position, he raised his eyes to Marcus, who noted beads of sweat pooling where previously there had been none.

The big man grunted. "Funny how the body fights to live, even in situations where the mind knows it cannot die."

"Help's on the way."

"Not the help I require, I'm afraid." He tried to look over his shoulder at the opposite building, but couldn't.

"Has it moved?" he asked.

Marcus studied the building. Even with the lights from the emergency vehicles below strobing the stone facade, he could see nothing remarkable. "No, I don't think so."

"Ah, yes — I forget. You can't see it."

"I don't know what to look for, I guess."

Sion the Baltic grimaced. "You'd see it if you could, believe me. It ate a world, you know. Not literally a whole planet, of course; just everything on it that mattered to me." For a moment, the big man looked terribly sad. "It ate my family," he added.

Marcus didn't know what to say. He didn't know that a madman — for such he now believed the big man to be — could evoke so strong a feeling of compassion within him, despite the apparent lunacy of his words.

"Tell me," he said, to gain time until the police were ready below.

"There's very little to say, in all honesty. It ate my family because I ran away from it. It ate everyone in its path because I kept running. It, in its primitive way, seems to desire my death — perhaps as a result of my careless summoning of it from whatever hellish place it calls home — and, until such a fate  
Light Bodies Falling

overwhelms me, I am in the unenviable position of knowing that my continued existence results in suffering for others. Others for whom my life holds no relevance whatsoever, except that I, by my carelessness, have killed them.

"It's ironic, really, that you should think of me as someone who might commit suicide, because that's what I adamantly refuse to do. If it kills me, it'll go away — most likely — but I will not die of my own hand. It's as simple as that."

Sion the Baltic shifted his left arm minutely.

"So they exiled me — those who'd once been proud to call me friend," he said, and then fell moodily silent.

Marcus waited for a minute or so, but the big man said no more. He seemed to fold in on himself, fueling his passions from within — and this was exactly what Marcus wanted to avoid.

"I had a sister who killed herself," he said, to breach the silence.

Sion the Baltic looked at him carefully, but said nothing.

"She was fifteen at the time, a bit of a rebel but nothing too outrageous, we thought. We didn't learn until after she died that she'd been into drugs for years, had even been a ... a prostitute, to pay for heroin."

"How did she die?" asked Sion the Baltic. "Did she jump off a building?"

"No. She shot herself in the head."

"My sympathies." Sion the Baltic was thoughtful for a moment, considering problems other than his own. "I understand now why you tried to help me," he said, "but I'm sorry to say that guilt is not so easily absolved."

"I'm not guilty," said Marcus.

"The fact of guilt does not matter in the slightest. Did you never feel that your parents blamed you for her death? You who still lived? You who they should have loved all the more for their loss?"

"No," replied Marcus, feeling a ball of long-forgotten grief flower anew deep in his throat. "They died in a car accident a year before my sister, ten years ago."

Sion the Baltic considered this. "Then you and I," he said, "are united by the loss of our families to forces beyond our control, and beyond our undoing. Perhaps — and I jest, tipping my hat to synchronicity — you should join me out here on my uncomfortable perch. I will understand if you decline the invitation."

Before Marcus could reply, there was movement in the office behind him: two police officers holding torches approached the window.

"Who is it?" asked Sion the Baltic.

"The police."

The big man craned his neck to peer downwards. "Too many people. It's learned the thrill of the chase."



perhaps — the joy of a single, long-anticipated death as opposed to mindless slaughter — but I'm not prepared to risk innocent lives on the off-chance." He chuckled self-deprecatingly. "See how my creature has evolved? My Frankenstein's monster?"

"No," said Marcus, ignoring the police who tried to move him aside, "I still can't see it."

"Of course you can't, my fellow. Be grateful for small mercies." Sion the Baltic shifted position yet again.

"One word of advice before I let go: don't, whatever else you might do, invent time travel."

"What?"

"Think of it as a door. When you open it, it lets things slip in and, if you go through, there's no guarantee you'll like where you end up."

"Wait —"

"I have enjoyed our little chat. Good-bye."

Sion the Baltic let go, and flung himself away from the building, into the night air.

**S**am Balkai, the police officers, the firemen, and the paramedics watched as the man in black leapt from his perch on the side of Abercrombie & Sons. They watched as Marcus Gardening stretched an arm out of the window, clutched in vain for the rapidly accelerating man, and overbalanced. They watched as the man himself calmly reached underneath his billowing coat and twisted in the air like a parachutist, unaware that he was being unwillingly followed.

There was a blinding flash.

**I**n the frozen instant of time that encapsulated the fall of Marcus Gardening and Sion the Baltic, David Stafford, one of the police officers in the building, had the best view — and perhaps the only view — of what happened next. Leaning out of the window as he was, his outstretched fist still grasping empty air, it seemed to him that the first of the falling men caught fire, growing brighter and brighter with each passing foot, partly occluded by the body of Marcus Gardening. The fiery descent lit the street, casting flickering shafts of yellow light across the spectators, the parked cars, and the face of the building opposite Abercrombie & Sons.

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, the wildly dancing shadows, or the fear of falling that had belatedly made itself known. Whatever the cause, David Stafford saw something move where previously there had been nothing:

Legs so long that they covered the face of the building in a hideous star, an obscenely swollen body twice as large as a patrol car, eyes like mine shafts with faint, sinister gleams in their uttermost depths — a shadowy spider large enough to eat a city crouched vertically, clinging to the side of the building opposite him as though preparing to leap.

The monster moved, seemed to look directly at him as his fellow officer tried to drag him back through the window. Officer Stafford could sense the creature thinking, considering alternatives ponderously. Its numerous eyes glinted with ill-concealed malice, and it seemed for an instant about to reach across the street and pluck him from the building.

Then, moving its legs as though running, the monster began to fade. Through this dissipating nightmare, the observing policeman imagined he saw trees, waving distantly at the whim of an unseen storm, a landscape of rainswept hills. The instant before the apparition entirely evaporated, a twinkle of lights made itself known in the impossible depths of the illusion and, superimposed upon them, two dark figures fleeing through the rain, one supporting the other — vanishing, fading, turning to stone and glass as the building opposite Abercrombie & Sons reasserted its ineluctable solidity.

**W**ith a flash that was bright only in comparison to the darkness of the blacked-out city, the street lamps flared back into life. Glowing purple as the gases within them reluctantly heated, they cast a surreal light on the proceedings below as fourteen people stared at a patch of pavement that should have been the final resting place for the two fallen men, but wasn't. □

## This is a double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription, or one if you paid the quarterly rate.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

# Boomerangs

(Continued from page 65)

Dear Mr. Ryan,

The current (Fall 1992) issue of your fine magazine included the splendid tribute to Isaac Asimov, and I wanted to thank you for writing it. I always enjoyed reading his stories and articles, and was immensely honored one time when he called me up on the telephone.

I was an electronics engineer and Section Manager at the Raytheon Company for almost 14 years; my work was almost exclusively in the "Over-the-Horizon-Radar" development. One late afternoon (after normal closing time) our group was having an informal exchange of ideas in my office, when the phone rang. I answered, and a voice said, "My name is Isaac Asimov, and I was given your name and number by the people at Lincoln Labs (the MIT research and development facility)."

I was startled, and blurted out, "Dr. Asimov, I read your stuff all the time!" (I meant it as a compliment, but afterwards I began to think the word "stuff" might have been thought uncomplimentary!!)

Dr. Asimov said, "My students have asked me how Over-the-Horizon radar works, because they read about Krushchev's statement that the USSR had a radar which could detect a fly at ranges well beyond the line-of-sight. What can you tell me about it?"

I was put in a spot, because almost everything about the U.S. efforts was classified. I could only refer him to some newspaper articles, and a magazine article, on the subject — and of course there was not much real substance in any of those sources.

The incident remains in fond-memory banks, of course.

*Aboriginal Science Fiction* is a splendid publication; I like everything about it. I look forward to the time when you can return to color for the illustrations, but the black and whites are very fine all the same.

Very best wishes,  
Bill Whitcraft, Jr.  
Natick, Massachusetts

Dear Editor,

My name is Andrew Dixon. I am currently in the process of tearing my hair out, losing teeth, and putting my nuts in the thumb screws. Yep, I'm almost finished with a short story. It is the beginning of series that has a lot of potential. I know it does.

The story is called *Carniverse*; a

galaxy-traveling amusement show that combines all the spectacle of the Circus and the thrills of the fairground. It entertains whole planets.

This first story is roughly hewn and choppy, very choppy. I am sending you this manuscript in the hope that you, A: will read it, and B: lend some insight into what the story needs to improve it to the point where you might consider putting it in print.

You may, at this point, be wondering where the damn thing is and, well ... You see I'm new at this and would like to know the format in which you would like the manuscript sent.

Also, I would appreciate any input on writers groups in or around the R.I./Mass. line.

And last, but not least, any information on Copyright laws and how I would go about getting *CARNIVERSE*, the concept, copyrighted would be most helpful. Thank you.

Yours sincerely,  
Andrew B. Dixon  
Someplace near Providence, Rhode Island

(Dear Andrew, and many other would-be writers out there: This arrived with no SASE and no return address. Any time you wish a reply from any magazine, or book publisher, you MUST INCLUDE A SASE [self-addressed, stamped envelope]. Writers' guidelines are available from most magazines, if you request them and include a SASE. You cannot copyright an idea such as you have described, only the manner, or style, in which you write about it. In this case, several authors have beaten you to the punch, most significantly Barry Longyear. *Connie Willis* has a story in *Aboriginal's* second issue about a similar circus. Isaac Asimov could never have written about his famous three laws of robotics if the idea of a thinking intelligent robot could be copyrighted, since he wasn't the first to write of them. Eando Binder (the pseudonym for brothers Earl Andrew and Otto Oscar Binder) was one of the early ones with his series of stories about the robot Adam Link starting in 1939. Go to a nearby science fiction convention, such as Boskone, Arisia, LunaCon, or Readercon, to meet other writers and would-be writers who might be interested in a writing workshop. Good luck. — Ed.)

Dear Editor,

I am a recent subscriber to your magazine and love to read when I can, as much of my family does. I was wanting you to suggest an article or even where to find a list of all-time

classics, authors of the past and present. Last year we discovered some fine stories from the '40s by authors long forgotten.

Also, my 12-year-old son does not read anything but short 20-minute stories. I've failed to increase his interest in subjects, or his patience to sit and read for long periods of time. What do you suggest? Classics? Books based on movies? Mystery? Science Fiction? Could I be overly concerned, and let him have other hobbies? His intelligence level is 9th grade — he's just lazy. He's in 7th grade.

Thanks for listening to my ideas and helping if you have time.

For your convenience, I've enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Sincerely yours,  
Arlene Witter  
Ardmore, Oklahoma

(Your local librarian would be happy to direct you to a list of suitable reading material, be it SF, classics, mysteries, westerns, or any other genre. In science fiction, there are a number of "year's best" collections of short stories which many libraries carry. Many libraries also carry back issues of periodicals such as ours. And that same library contains numerous reference books which can point the way toward unlimited reading pleasure. — Ed.)

Dear Mr. Ryan and/or that Crazy Alien,

Let me say from the start that I am thoroughly pleased with your magazine. I used to devour each issue the same day I received it. I have now learned to savor it, reading a little each day. It makes me reminiscent of the glory days of SF mags. Your stories and artwork are ALWAYS of very fine quality, which makes me yearn for every issue. I thought that going to a non-profit system was very imaginative, and what I would expect from such creative people. The new format is very good. I will gladly give up color art for the continued existence of your fine publication. In the spirit of Vulcan, "May you live long and prosper, *Aboriginal*."

I would like to reiterate how pleased I am with your magazine. I wish you continued success and a long readership. I will be continuing my subscription. I will remit the funds ASAP. I don't want to miss a single issue.

Sincerely,  
William Ratkze  
Navasota, Texas

# Covers for your walls



Aboriginal No. 1



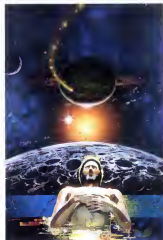
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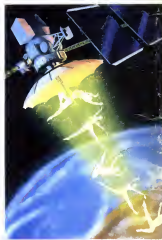
Aboriginal No. 3



Aboriginal No. 4



Aboriginal No. 5



Aboriginal No. 6

## The Aboriginal Art Gallery

The Aboriginal Art Gallery is your chance to obtain a glossy print of one or more illustrations used for our early cover art before the magazine was printed on glossy paper. The prints are as crisp and as sharp as the original artwork and have a clarity we could not reproduce in issues 1 to 7 on a cold web.

These prints are big. Most of them are 11 by 14 inches and will be mailed rolled in a tube. The cost is \$15 for each **un-mounted** print, plus \$3 postage and handling.

To order one or more prints, send your check to: The Aboriginal Art Gallery  
c/o Aboriginal Science Fiction  
P.O. Box 2449  
Woburn, MA 01888-0849



Aboriginal No. 7



Aboriginal No. 8